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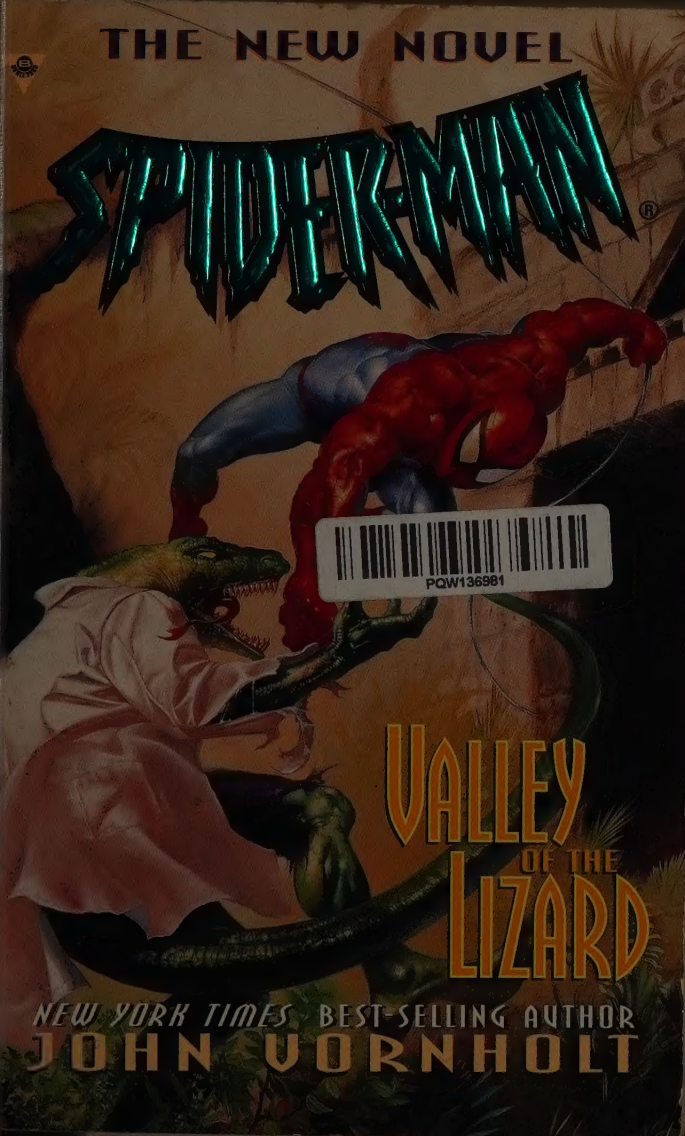

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VALLEY OF THE LIZARD

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

JOHN VORNHOLT

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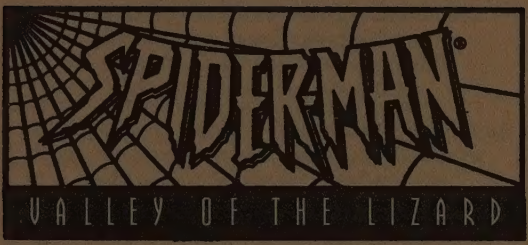
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VALLEY OF THE LIZARD

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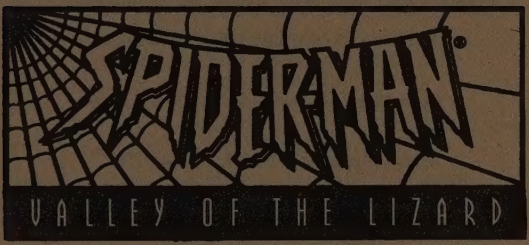

JOHN VORNHOLT

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SPIDER-MAN: VALLEY OF THE LIZARD

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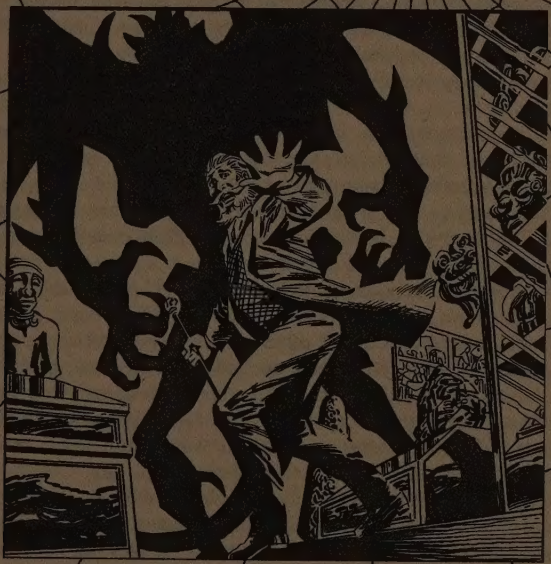
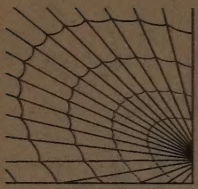
For my wonderful parents.

CHAPTER 1





Alexander Baldauf swirled the Courvousier in his snifter and, as was his habit before retiring, surveyed his priceless art collection. He only glanced at the Matisse, the Picasso, and the Chagall—to make sure they were still there. Most visitors to his luxurious apartment on Park Avenue never got past the celebrated canvases hanging on the walls, but Baldauf had long ceased to be moved by them. They were merely doodles made by expert hands, hardly more than expressions of pure ego. They didn't tell a story—didn't convey history—like the pieces in the lighted cabinet in the foyer.

Dressed impeccably in a purple smoking jacket, the aged industrialist shuffled into the foyer to view his prizes. In a lifetime spent collecting artwork, companies, real estate, and wives, nothing had given him more pleasure than collecting pre-Columbian art. Not only was it incredibly beautiful, but it was incredibly rare and mysterious.

The Spanish conquistadors and priests had done quite a job when it came to wiping out the artifacts of the Aztec, Maya, Mixtec, Inca, and so many other cultures. Nevertheless, a few examples of their remarkable art had survived, smuggled out of South and Central America by noblemen, paupers, and heretics. The wanton destruction that had taken place at the hands of Cortés, Pizarro, and their ilk was terrible to consider, but it made Baldauf's collection precious and rare.

His eyes went first to the largest pieces, the terra cotta figures which stood several inches tall. Squat and serene, these plump gods, goddesses, and maternity figures sat on their haunches and stared at him with vibrant eyes. There was grace, wisdom, and life in every sinewy curve of their features. Beneath them sat a row of stylized clay beasts—jaguars, birds, deer, snakes, and many he couldn't identify.

Baldauf's eyes traveled down the translucent shelves to a grouping of jade and gold figurines. The workmanship was exquisite, a triumph of lost wax-casting. He could count the

perfect teeth on a tiny golden skull or a pouncing jaguar. Among the figurines were two ceremonial cups, inlaid with turquoise, jade, and mother-of-pearl.

Baldauf didn't have many gold figures, not nearly as many as he would have liked. But collecting pre-Columbian art was more a matter of luck and determination than simply throwing money around. To get works out of Central America, it was better to know smugglers than art dealers. Knowing a failing museum was the best of all, as there were priceless works scattered all over Europe, the spoils of colonial conquest.

These musings made Baldauf think of his latest acquisition, and he lifted his eyes to the top shelf to view the Aztec codex. Actually, it was only a fragment of a codex, barely two pages of a picture book painted on bark paper that had once numbered fifty-two pages. Each page was a little over a foot square, crammed with colorful, cartoon-like drawings of fantastic places and events. The paintings were populated by people and gods with large noses, indulging in everyday activities, such as marriage, funerals, dancing, and human sacrifice.

However, the drawings were much more complex than that—they constituted a written language that was often compared to Egyptian hieroglyphics. Every tiny detail, and even the colors chosen, were symbolic and could be interpreted by an Aztec priest. Baldauf could read some of it: Six circles and an ugly head floating over one young lady meant that her name was "6 Monkey." A funeral bundle clearly represented "death," and footprints meant a "road." The richly detailed pictures could convey any kind of information: astronomy, geography, history, or laws.

Unfortunately, in their zeal to destroy these unholy works, the Spanish priests had been all too successful. Nothing comparable to the Rosetta Stone had ever been found, and scholars were still debating how to interpret the colorful symbols. The codices were mysteries that would never be fully solved.

As Alexander Baldauf stared at the frolicking figures, wondrous creatures, and strange symbols, he was reminded of Tarot cards. In these two fragile pages, there were answers to

be found, if you only knew how to read the intricate symbols. While the Manhattan traffic droned twenty stories below, Baldauf could almost hear the Aztec priests murmuring their chants and incantations. They were talking to him from graves lost over 700 years ago.

A door slammed, and Baldauf whirled around, his heart suddenly racing. His wrist felt damp, and he looked down to see that he had spilled a few drops of cognac. He would have to warn James about making loud noises like that!

Of course, he had been daydreaming as he stared at the codex, and perhaps the noise hadn't been so loud. He sighed and looked back at his wondrous possession—a piece so complex and dramatic that a person could get lost in it.

James, his butler for thirty years, strode through the dining room and into the foyer. His overcoat was draped over his arm. "Mr. Baldauf?" he asked politely. "Is there anything I can get you before I go?"

Baldauf licked the cognac off the age spots on his wrist. "No, James, I'm fine. I was just admiring the codex again. Have you ever seen anything like that?"

The elderly servant looked at the ancient pages and shrugged. "Maybe in the Sunday funny papers."

Baldauf chuckled. "Yes, it does look like a comic book, but it's not. In these pages, there's ancient wisdom that we'll never understand. The key has been lost forever."

"If you say so, sir." James pulled his overcoat on. "I think I'll be going before it gets too cold. I appreciate your giving me the night off, sir."

Baldauf shrugged. "Well, if you have to babysit your daughter's children, so be it. I can get along."

James nodded as if he never doubted it. "I'll see you in the morning then, sir."

"Goodnight, James."

The servant strode to the front door and began unlocking a daunting series of dead bolts and chain locks. "By the way, sir," James said, "did you see the new gargoyles?"

"Gargoyles?" asked Baldauf. "Where?"

"On the cornices half-way up the building," answered James. "I noticed them about an hour ago, when I went out to get your newspaper. Ugly-looking things."

"Well, the management had better not try to charge the tenants anything for them," growled Baldauf. "We pay enough fees already."

"Yes, sir," said James, unlocking the last bolt. "Is there anything else, sir?"

Baldauf rubbed his chin with a gnarled hand. It was clear from his expression that he was fuming over the news about the new statuary. He looked up and noticed that James was still waiting for an answer.

"Tell the doorman that I'll want my car at ten o'clock in the morning," Baldauf said moodily. "I think I'll have a little talk with the management about their idea of building improvements."

"Yes, sir. Goodnight." James hurried out into the thickly carpeted hallway, as though anxious to get away from his suddenly grumpy boss.

Baldauf shut the door behind James and locked the bolts and chains as quickly as his arthritic fingers would let him.

Imagine, he thought. *Gargoyles! This building has been standing for close to seventy years—it's practically a landmark! Why go and ruin its appearance with a bunch of ghastly stone statues better suited for decorating a cemetary?* Baldauf snorted. *Well, the management is certainly in for an earful tomorrow morning, I promise that!*

Baldauf slugged down the last of his cognac and placed the empty snifter on a small table in the hall. He started toward the bedroom . . .

. . . and came to an abrupt halt at the sound of a heavy object dropping to the floor.

The noise came from the living room. Hesitantly, Baldauf shuffled into the lounge, which was furnished in a sleek, Danish modern style—mostly white and black pieces. He turned on the overhead lights and looked around. There seemed to be nothing amiss—nothing had fallen off the shelves or tables.

Baldauf turned and gazed toward the balcony window.

The tiny deck was called a "balcony," even though there was hardly room to stand out there. A pair of ornate French doors—part of the building's original design—led to what was really an oversized ledge. Baldauf stepped toward the drawn curtains that hung from above the door frame, then stopped.

"Probably just pigeons," Baldauf said. He frowned. "Stupid birds." Baldauf shrugged and flicked off the lights. With a yawn, he headed once more toward his bedroom.

And that's when the window was suddenly smashed in.

With his heart pounding in his fragile chest, Baldauf whirled around and peered into the darkened living room. The thick curtains had been torn from their mountings. The balcony doors had been shattered, the ornate wooden frames snapped into kindling. Glass was scattered across the carpeted floor. Through the broken entrance could be heard the faint sounds of traffic moving along Park Avenue. Baldauf shivered as a brisk March wind blew through the apartment. He pulled his robe tightly around himself.

A crouching, misshapen figure huddled in the doorway, its twisted body framed by the city lights behind it. Baldauf tried to make out the intruder's features, but the room was too dark and his eyesight too poor. The intruder stepped away from the doorway, disappearing into the semi-darkness of the room.

I'm being robbed! Baldauf thought. *This can't be happening! I pay for the best security measures! I'm surrounded by locks, doormen, and electronic devices. This can't be happening!*

"Who's there?" demanded Baldauf in a shaky voice.

A lamp shattered, and Baldauf gasped. In the darkness, he thought he saw more shadowy, deformed figures scamper into the living room. The intruders paid no attention to him as they rushed into the foyer.

My art! Baldauf thought. *They're going to kill me and steal my precious art!*

Baldauf turned and ran for the safety of his bedroom. He

slammed the door behind him and, with fumbling fingers, turned the lock.

"Open the door, Alexander," said a woman's voice through the door. "Don't be afraid. We're friends."

"Who . . . who are you?" asked Baldauf in confusion. He suddenly felt very old and tired.

"We're . . . angels."

"Angels?"

"Yes, who else could fly in here? I'm going to step away from the door. You open it and see for yourself."

Baldauf shook with rage. "Who do you think you're talking to—a child?" he snapped. "You're just a bunch of common thieves, that's what you are!"

"Alexander, you will open the door . . . *now,*" said the woman. From the tone of her voice, it wasn't a request, but a command.

"I'm calling the police!" Baldauf yelled. He reached for the phone that sat on a nightstand beside his bed.

The door was suddenly torn off its hinges. Frightened, Baldauf dropped the phone and staggered back upon the bed, expecting the worst.

On the other side of the doorway stood a stunning, dark-haired woman; in her hands, she held the bedroom door. She was not exactly angelic, not with a knowing smile like that, but she was still an unearthly vision in a glittering evening gown. The woman gently leaned the door against a wall, then clapped her hands together to wipe off the plaster dust which covered her palms.

Something moved in the shadows behind her, and she stepped aside. At once, half-a-dozen horrible creatures hopped, flapped, and crawled into the room, swarming all over the old man.

With a shriek, Baldauf fell to the floor as leathery wings enveloped him. He beat his feeble fists against one of the nameless horrors, but it sunk its long fangs into his throat.

Baldauf felt lightheaded. His skin paled, and he felt his body

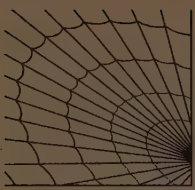
growing colder as his blood was drained by his grotesque assailants.

"Not angels . . ." he whispered hoarsely. "Gargoyles . . ."

Baldauf looked up and saw the beautiful woman standing over him. Eyes shining madly, lips pulled back in a feral snarl, she looked more like a wild animal baring its fangs, attracted by the scent of blood. A low growl sounded from her throat.

And then she, too, fell upon him.

CHAPTER 2



Peter Parker sat on the corner of an unoccupied desk in the cavernous newsroom of the *Daily Bugle.* Chaos reigned as usual, with copy editors, interns, and messengers scuttling between the desks and cubicles. The air was filled with the sounds of phones ringing, desk drawers slamming, and people shouting, all blending together in an eardrum-rattling blanket of noise. For 9:30 in the morning, the newsroom was actually peaceful for a Wednesday . . . all things considered. However, that would soon change as the afternoon deadlines approached.

The freelance photographer tried to catch bits of conversation through the din. With his wife, Mary Jane, still looking for steady employment, Peter had traveled to the *Bugle* in the hopes of landing an assignment that would help pay the bills. But after meeting with editor-in-chief Joe Robertson, Peter was faced with the depressing fact that it was shaping up to be a slow news day in New York. Of course, there were stories to be covered—a student demonstration at Empire State University over rising tuition costs, a flower show at the New York Coliseum—but those assignments had already been handed out to staff photographers. There was nothing that required the services of a crime photographer like Peter. Or even Peter's costumed alter-ego, the amazing Spider-Man.

Sighing heavily, Peter turned his attention to the half-eaten doughnut he was holding. He'd already eaten two of the slightly stale cakes—taken from his raid on the break room—and had commandeered the empty desk he now sat upon to wait for a story to break.

Something better happen soon, Peter thought. *If I keep eating like this while I'm hanging around the* Bugle, *I'll have to change my name to the amazing Spider-Blimp.* He eyed the remains of the glazed cruller, holding it at arm's length as though he were Hamlet contemplating the skull of Yorick. *Well, I could always look on the bright side. If I fill my stomach now, maybe I won't need to buy lunch. I could save a few*

bucks that way. And considering the bills MJ and I are facing, saving a few bucks wouldn't be a bad idea.

Suddenly, a hush fell across the newsroom—the kind of unnatural calm usually associated with the eye of a storm passing overhead. Peter looked up to see a scowling J. Jonah Jameson—publisher of the *Bugle*—standing in the doorway of his office. Jonah's eyes scanned the room, then focused on Peter, like a missile locking on to a target. Peter could almost feel the withering heat of Jonah's gaze from across the room.

"Parker!" snapped Jameson. "My office. Now!" Not waiting for an answer, Jameson turned and re-entered his office.

"Yes, your excellence," said Peter. Stuffing the rest of the cruller into his mouth, Peter strode across the newsroom. He ignored the mix of worried gazes and wicked smiles that played across the faces of the staffers as they watched him approach Jameson's office. It wasn't the first time that Peter had been summoned in so brusque a manner—that was Jonah's style, after all—and it certainly wouldn't be the last.

Entering Jameson's office, Peter found Jonah seated behind the publisher's massive oak desk. Jameson was putting a lit wooden match to the end of a well-chewed cigar stub. The room quickly filled with the eye-stinging smoke of cheap tobacco.

"Shut the door," growled Jameson. "Blasted smoking regulations."

Peter gave the door a flick, and it wheezed shut. As he turned back to face Jameson, Peter's gaze fell on a familiar figure seated on a leather chair on the far side of the office.

"Hey, Ben," said Peter.

Ben Urich looked up from the voluminous notepad in which he'd been writing, and nodded at the young photographer. "Parker," he said. Urich's voice was husky from years of chainsmoking cigarettes and visiting the kinds of watering holes frequented by reporters and off-duty police officers.

In a world of computer web-sites and 24-hour news services, Jonah Jameson and Ben Urich could be considered the stereotypes of old-fashioned reporters—tough, cynical, and te-

nacious as hell when it came to getting the facts on a story. For all his posturing, Jameson wore the First Amendment like a super hero wore a cape, and fought just as hard for it as, say, Captain America . . . each in his own way, of course. And Urich had a Pulitzer Prize for excellence in journalism to show what years of hard work could accomplish.

Peter turned to Jameson. "So, what's going on, Jonah?"

It was Urich who answered. "Got a tip from one of my sources at One Police Plaza. Last night, someone paid a visit to Alexander Baldauf. You know who he is?"

Peter thought for a moment. "Industrialist, right? Last of the great tycoons."

Urich nodded. "Made his money the old-fashioned way—by driving his competitors out of business. Well, last night somebody put *him* out of business . . . permanently."

"He's dead?" asked Peter.

"Uh-huh," replied Urich. "The body was discovered a half-hour ago by—" he checked his notepad "—his butler." He flashed a wry smile. "Guess the butler didn't do it this time."

Jameson used his cigar like a classroom pointer, aiming its glowing tip at Peter. "I want you and Ben covering this. Get up to Baldauf's apartment and get me shots of the crime scene. I want to know who the police suspect, why they think Baldauf was killed, who his enemies were. And I want it on my desk before we go to press with the afternoon edition."

Urich rose from his seat, taking his rumpled brown raincoat from the arm of the chair. "We're on it, Jonah." He walked past Peter, opened the door, and exited the office.

Peter hesitated in the doorway. He turned back to face Jameson, but said nothing. Jonah glowered at him.

"The meter's running, Parker," said Jameson. "Either say something or get out."

"Well, Jonah," Peter said hesitantly, "I was wondering if I could get some extra cash for the crime scene shots. Money's been a little tight for MJ and me lately and—"

Jameson exhaled sharply, his nostrils flaring. The image made Peter think of a bull preparing to charge.

"Do you think I run some sort of *charity* here, Parker?" Jonah bellowed. "You think I gave you this assignment out of the goodness of my heart?"

"Well, no, but—" Peter began. Through the open door he could hear the soft snickering of the staff members in the newsroom.

"Exactly!" said Jameson. He rose to his feet, pointing an accusatory finger at Peter. "You're a *body,* Parker—a body with a camera, nothing more! The same goes for my regular staff photographers. If one of them had been here, I would've handed the job to the first one I laid eyes on. But *they're* out covering other stories, and *you* happened to be sitting outside, eating the food I pay for! I don't play favorites—I use what's available. Do you understand?"

Peter nodded. He was used to Jonah's tirades. "Absolutely. Now, about that extra money . . ."

Jonah gnashed his teeth for a moment, then frowned. "Oh, all right. An extra hundred if they contain something the other papers won't have."

"They'll be the best crime shots you've ever seen, Jonah," Peter said happily.

"I don't want the best," snapped Jameson, "I want the most newsworthy! I want front-page material!"

"You'll get it!" said Peter. "Thanks, Jonah—you're a real sweetheart!" Before he could give Jameson an opportunity to start yelling again, Peter hurried out of the office. He closed the door behind him.

Jameson slumped down into his oversized leather chair and wearily rubbed a hand through his brushcut salt-and-pepper hair.

"I'm too soft on that blasted kid," he muttered.

A battered yellow cab screeched to a halt at the corner of Eighty-ninth Street and Park Avenue. A line of blue-painted, wooden police barricades blocked any further progress up the street. Peter and Urich stepped from the cab, the older reporter stopping to haggle with the cab driver about the need of a

receipt so Urich could be reimbursed by the *Bugle*. Peter looked up at their destination: a towering apartment building on the corner of the block, in front of which were parked three patrol cars, a coroner's van, and a forensics van. Despite their quick travel time from the *Bugle,* Peter and Urich saw that the street was swarming with television news crews and newspaper reporters.

"So much for your source giving us a jump on the other reporters," Peter remarked.

"Willie never could keep a secret," grumbled Urich. "Put your camera away and follow me."

"Where are we going?" asked Peter.

"Parking garage," said Urich, leading the way. They walked east on Eighty-ninth Street, heading for the cave-like entrance of a parking garage that ran beneath the apartment building. Urich shuffled down the ramp, and Peter dutifully followed.

At the bottom of the ramp stood their first hurdle, the tiny headquarters of the parking attendant. Peter could see a young man inside the booth.

Urich marched up to the attendant and demanded in his most indignant voice, "So, where's my car? What are you waiting for?"

The attendant snapped to attention. He took a moment to gaze at Urich's rumpled appearance, but made no comment. "Pardon me, sir?" he asked politely.

"My car, the black Bentley." Urich looked at his watch. "It's ten o'clock. Are you going to wait all day to bring it up?"

The young man opened a wooden cabinet, revealing dozens of sets of car keys hanging on posts marked by parking spaces. "I didn't get the message, sir. Which space was it?"

"One-ninety-seven," answered Urich. "Get a move-on!"

"Yes, sir!" The attendant locked his booth and dashed down a ramp to a lower level of the garage. Urich immediately headed for the elevator, with Peter trailing behind.

"We'll get off on the floor *above* Baldauf's place and use

the stairs," said Urich, pressing buttons. "They'll have cops watching the elevators for anyone coming up, but they won't expect people coming *down.*"

Sure enough, by taking emergency stairs and a circuitous route, they never confronted a cop until they had reached the twentieth floor and were standing outside Alexander Baldauf's apartment. Across the open door was a strip of yellow police tape, which they dared not cross, but it was clear from the smashed glass cabinet in the foyer that a burglary had taken place.

Peter whipped out his camera and began snapping away. His flash caught the attention of the cops inside.

"You there!" barked a female plainclothes officer. "This crime scene is closed." The husky, dark-haired woman strode toward them, looking as if she would rip their heads off.

"Not to the fourth estate," answered Urich, taking out his *Bugle* I.D. "Public's got a right to know, Detective . . . ?"

"Henshaw," answered the woman. "Detective Lucille Henshaw, Homicide." She turned to one of her colleagues, a heavy-set, balding man with a thick mustache and a dour expression on his face. "Hey, Andy, do we want to make a statement to the *Daily Bugle?*"

Andy pondered the question for a moment. He shrugged. "Go ahead, Lucy," he said. "Might as well get the word out about what was taken, in case the skells try to sell it." He looked at the reporter. "Hey, Urich, there's gonna be a full press briefing in an hour, anyway, so why don't you take a hike? You and camera-boy there can go circle the area with the rest of your press-vulture buddies until we're ready."

"Can't wait, Detective. I'm on deadline." Urich turned back to Henshaw. "So, what's the situation?"

The cop consulted her notepad. "Mr. Baldauf's body was discovered about 8:50 this morning by his butler, James Willberry, when he came to work. The butler saw him alive around 9:00 last night, and we peg his death shortly after that. No eyewitnesses or other victims. Probable motive was robbery."

"What was taken?" asked Urich. He gestured with his pen

toward the smashed display case. "Apparently, it included what was in that cabinet."

The detective glanced back at the case. "Actually, the only items missing are the ones from that case. If you saw the stuff that was left behind, you'd be shocked."

A white-suited technician entered the foyer and started sifting through the glass on the floor. Peter squeezed off a photo of the investigator. Through his lens, he could see what looked like a Picasso hanging in the dining room beyond.

Detective Henshaw shook her head, apparently in disbelief. "They even left jewelry and electronics, and a big fat Rolex on the dressing table. The only items taken were the stuff in that case."

"What was in it?" asked Peter.

"It was all pre-Columbian art, according to the butler," Henshaw replied. "He said there were clay figures, a few gold sculptures, and a thing that looked like a comic book. We need to check with Baldauf's insurance company to get a full list, but it was all one-of-a-kind stuff, easy to trace and hard to fence. We hope to have some photos to distribute at the press conference."

"Entry was made through this door?" asked Urich, pointing to the yellow tape strung between them and the cop.

"No," said Detective Henshaw with a frown. "Entry was made through the balcony window."

"So the perpetrator flew in?" asked Urich.

Henshaw shrugged. "No evidence of any kind of climbing equipment—no ropes or rigging left behind."

"Any possibility that Baldauf was mixed up with some superpowered characters?" asked the reporter.

"We're looking into that area," Henshaw replied.

"What was the cause of death?" Urich asked.

The detective's expression darkened. "No comment."

Urich chuckled. "I was wondering when you were going to start saying that. Come on, Detective—was he shot? Stabbed? Drawn-and-quartered?"

"Sorry, Urich," said Henshaw. "You'll just have to wait for the coroner's report like everyone else."

"You're all heart, Detective," muttered Urich.

Suddenly, there was a commotion behind the cop, and two brawny coroner's assistants pushed a gurney through the living room, enroute to the front door. On the gurney was a gleaming, black body bag.

Henshaw ripped the yellow tape off the doorway. "Step back," she ordered. "Way back."

Peter and Urich flattened against the wall to allow the coroner's team to pass. Peter snapped off a shot of the gurney's contents.

The parade out of the apartment was not yet finished. A stoop-shouldered older man shuffled out, flanked by two uniformed officers. *Must be the butler,* Peter thought.

Urich stepped into the path of the entourage. "Excuse me, sir," he said to James, "were you the person who found the body?"

"Hey, Urich, how about you back off and leave the guy alone?" snapped the balding detective.

"Can he talk for himself?" growled Urich. He turned back to the butler. "Do you have any idea who might want to kill your boss?"

"Huh?" rasped the distraught man. Clearly disoriented by his gruesome discovery, James seemed to have trouble focusing on Urich's questions.

Peter felt sorry for the old servant, but he still snapped a picture of the man.

"Did you see anything suspicious last night?" asked Urich.

The old man blinked at him. "The gargoyles," he said hoarsely. "They're not there now."

Urich squinted at him. "Gargoyles? What are you talking about?"

One of the cops rolled his eyes. "He said there were gargoyles on the building last night, but they're not there now." He shrugged and turned to the butler. "Come on, Mr. Willberry, let's get you home."

As the cops led their witness away, Urich stopped writing and softly tapped the edge of his notepad against his chin. He stared intently at a spot on a far wall, clearly deep in thought.

"Something bothering you, Ben?" asked Peter.

Urich continued staring into space for a moment, then shook his head to clear it. He turned to Peter. "Wish I'd gotten a look at the body. Might have some clue to the killer's identity."

Peter dropped his voice to avoid being overheard. "I'll see what I can do about that. Meet you out front."

Turning on his heel, Peter hurried toward the fire stairs. A smile crossed Urich's usually dour face as he watched the young photographer race through the doorway.

"I'll make a reporter out of him yet," Urich murmured to himself.

Now on his own, Peter could make use of his spider-powers. His spider-sense—that unique, internal early-warning system that warned him of imminent danger—would have alerted him to the presence of anyone on the stairwell, but Peter didn't feel even a slight buzz. He moved with blinding speed down the stairwell, bouncing from wall to wall as he headed back to the garage. In seconds, he had covered twenty-plus floors and arrived at the door leading to the garage.

Peter opened the door and peered out. The coroner's van was just pulling up to the elevator in which Peter and Urich had entered the building. A pair of uniformed officers stood guard nearby. The elevator doors opened, and the coroner's men stepped out, pushing the gurney between them.

Thank goodness for slow-moving elevators, thought Peter.

Peter stepped back into the stairwell and closed the door. He grabbed his camera and quickly rewound the film he'd just shot of the crime scene, shoving the small metal canister into a jacket pocket. Reaching into another pocket, he removed a telephoto lens and a new roll of high-speed film—the kind that would allow him to take pictures in the low lighting of the garage without using the camera's flash.

Ready for action, Peter took off his shoes and placed them in a corner, then opened the door just wide enough for him to slip through without drawing the attention of the police. Moving around in stocking feet allowed Peter to use his spider-like ability to cling to surfaces. He jumped up to adhere his hands and feet to the low roof of the garage. Keeping to the shadows, he crept across the rough concrete surface toward the coroner's van.

"So, what's the word, Quince?" asked one of the officers—whose nameplate read "Yarnell"—as the coroner's men joined them.

Quince, a haggard-looking man in his late forties with a ruddy, bulbous nose, shook his head in disbelief. "Regular freak-show going on upstairs."

The other cop, named Shields, looked quizzically at Quince. "What do you mean?"

Quince unzipped the black body bag and pulled back the upper flap. "Check this out," he said, gesturing toward the body.

Clinging upside-down with his feet to the garage roof, Peter crept within ten feet of the group and brought his camera to eye-level. By using a telephoto lens, he was able to get a clear shot of Baldauf's body without being too close to the action. It wouldn't do for the police to look up and notice a nosy photographer hanging upside-down from the ceiling like a certain, well-known, friendly, neighborhood busybody.

Peter froze as, through the lens, he noticed a pair of marks on Baldauf's throat. They were deep punctures in the flesh, the kind that might have been caused by the teeth of an attacking animal.

Or a vampire.

Could Morbius be back in town? Peter thought. One of Spider-Man's deadliest enemies, Michael Morbius was a scientist who had accidentally transformed himself into a vampire by experimenting with an untested cure for the unique blood disease from which he had been suffering. Not quite dead, not quite alive, Morbius spent his nights hunting for criminals on

which to feed and satisfy the maddening bloodlust that filled his every waking thought. *I'll think about that later. Right now, I need that front-page shot Jonah was demanding.* Peter pressed the shutter on the camera.

The clicking sound reverberated like a pistol shot in the enclosed space.

The officers spun around as Peter ducked back into the shadows.

"Cover that up!" Yarnell yelled at Quince as he pointed to the body. "Get it in the van!" Quince and his assistant moved hurriedly to comply with the order.

Smart, Einstein, real smart, Peter thought, berating himself. *Out of all the possible places to take pictures in New York, you have to pick the one that's an echo chamber.* He shook his head sadly. *Nice to see the old Parker luck is running true to form . . .*

Shields moved forward a few paces in Peter's direction, then stopped and looked around. Peter remained frozen in place, not daring even to breathe.

"Anything?" asked Yarnell.

Shields shook his head. "Nah. Must've been rats or something." He turned and walked back to the van.

As the group fell back into conversation, Peter breathed a silent sigh of relief. He scurried back to the stairwell to retrieve his shoes and join up with Urich.

Back at the newsroom of the *Daily Bugle,* Peter dropped off his film at the newspaper's photo lab for processing. Jameson wanted the crime scene shots developed immediately while he and Joe Robertson starting composing the front page on computer.

Peter stopped off at the accounting department to drop off his voucher for his work. Luckily, they were cutting checks that day, so he soon had payment in hand.

Peter happily drifted into the newsroom. Urich had enlisted two interns to do some research—one on pre-Columbian art, the other on Alexander Baldauf—and the two college kids

were off pouring through the *Bugle*'s back issue morgue. Peter headed for the break room to watch the press briefing on TV. Another reporter had been assigned to actually cover the briefing, so that Urich could start writing his own story.

It was no surprise to learn that the New York Police Department was divulging less information at the conference than Peter and Urich had accumulated at the crime scene. There was no mention of the cause of death.

"We're awaiting the coroner's report," said a well-coifed police spokesman. "Until then, we've chosen to keep certain information on the case classified so that our investigation can proceed without disruption."

The stolen artwork had been catalogued, and several full-color photos of the items were handed out to the press. Peter doubted that the missing artwork would pop up at a pawnshop or garage sale.

Scarfing down a hardened bagel slathered with cream cheese, Peter headed back to the newsroom. One of the interns had returned to Urich with an interesting fact: There had been two other recent burglaries of pre-Columbian art—one at a museum in Trenton, New Jersey, the other in a private home on Long Island. Unfortunately, no one had been around when those burglaries occurred, so no descriptions of the thieves were available.

Urich mulled over this news. "The other burglaries might just be a coincidence, but I doubt it. Looks like a pattern of robberies." He paused for a moment. "Might be a new crime organization moving into town. Either that, or there's a super-villain out there with an eye for Latin-American antiquities."

Doesn't sound like the kind of thing any of the super-villains I've *faced would be interested in,* thought Peter. *Most of them are strictly cold-cash types. I doubt most of them would know the difference between a Picasso and clowns painted on black velvet.*

Peter checked his watch and saw that it was almost lunch time. He walked over to an unoccupied desk to use the phone,

hoping he might catch Mary Jane at home after her latest casting agency interview.

She answered on the first ring, sounding disheartened. "Hello."

"Hi, sweetheart, it's me. How'd the interview go?"

"Miserably," Mary Jane groaned. "All the agencies want in models these days is that zombie look, with stringy hair and a pasty complexion. 'Stringy' and 'pasty' certainly aren't the kind of words people use to describe me."

"For which I'm eternally grateful," said Peter. "Your specialty's the vibrant, curvy, drop-dead gorgeous look. If the agents are too dumb to not want *that,* then they're not worth your time."

"Thanks, Tiger," MJ said, sounding a bit more cheerful. "How's *your* day been going?"

"Well, it's always been my experience that if you hang around the *Bugle* long enough, Jonah's bound to throw something in your direction, if only to get rid of you."

"You got an assignment?" MJ asked.

"Sure did, pretty lady," said Peter. "Another Peter Parker front-page photo exclusive. Did you hear about Alexander Baldauf getting robbed and murdered in his apartment?"

"I caught something about that on the radio."

"Ben Urich and I were there to cover the police investigation," said Peter. "A pretty gruesome murder, but the robbery itself was the weird part."

"In what way?" asked Mary Jane.

"All they took was his collection of pre-Columbian art, leaving more valuable stuff behind," Peter explained. "On top of that, we just discovered there've been two other recent burglaries of pre-Columbian art."

"Oh, no!" gasped Mary Jane. "Helene and Richard aren't going to want to hear about this!"

"Uh . . ." Peter said, trying to remember the people to whom Mary Jane was referring.

"Helene and Richard Cartham, Peter," MJ said sternly.

"Don't you remember—we're going to the gala opening of their art exhibition Friday night."

"D'oh!" said Peter, slapping himself in the head. "Sorry, MJ. I completely forgot." He scratched his chin. "Uh, I know I'm gonna get rapped in the mouth for this, but what does it have to do with—"

MJ sighed. "It's a Native American art exhibition, Peter."

"The timing couldn't be worse, huh?" Peter replied. "With all these thefts going on, that exhibit's a natural . . . *target*."

Peter smiled as an idea suddenly came to mind. "Listen, MJ, give Helene and Richard a call, and let's meet them for lunch. I'd like to talk to them about this."

"I'm sure they're at the gallery," answered MJ. "They practically live there." She paused. "What've you got planned?"

"I don't know what you mean," Peter said, a hint of innocence in his voice.

Mary Jane wasn't buying it. "You don't remember having to attend my friends' gallery opening—which just happens to involve pieces of pre-Columbian art, the same kind of stuff that's being stolen from art collections—and suddenly you want to have lunch with them."

"Why do you think I have an ulterior motive?" asked Peter.

"Because I know you all too well, Tiger," replied Mary Jane. "There's an Italian restaurant across the street from the gallery. Do you know where it is?"

"Tutorro's? Sure." Peter smiled. "Fancy-looking enough for your friends, just inexpensive enough for a struggling photographer to afford more than a bread basket and a pat of butter."

"And if I can't reach them, you'll just have to put up with *me* for lunch," Mary Jane said playfully.

"I'll suffer through it," Peter said sarcastically.

"How's two o'clock sound?"

"I'll see you then," said Peter.

• • •

There were few people who could resist a summons from Mary Jane Watson-Parker, and Peter wasn't surprised to see her walk into Tutorro's with an artsy couple in tow. Helene and Richard Cartham were a few years older than he and MJ, but they did their best to look youthful. Helene had a streak of purple in her jet-black hair, and Richard wore the type of goatee that was currently in vogue. They weren't exactly the kind of people with whom Peter would normally socialize, but they were two of Mary Jane's dearest friends. She had met the trendy couple during her time as a highly paid, much-sought-after fashion model.

"Hi," Peter said, shaking their hands. "I'm glad you could make it."

Richard tugged nervously on his goatee. "Mary Jane said you wanted to tell us about a rash of robberies . . . of pre-Columbian art?"

"That's not what we need to hear," groaned Helene.

Peter pointed to a corner booth, away from the bustling, lunchtime traffic in the popular restaurant. "I was on assignment this morning for the *Bugle,* and I learned a few things. Why don't we sit down, and I'll tell you about it."

Five minutes later, Helene and Richard were in total shock as they listened to Peter's description of the mysterious death of Alexander Baldauf, and the robbery at his apartment. When he mentioned the other two burglaries, Richard nodded grimly. "I knew about the one on Long Island."

Helene shot him a look. "Why didn't you tell me about it?"

"I didn't want to worry you, my dear," Richard replied, patting her hand in a consoling gesture.

"Well, now I *am* worried." Helene turned to Peter. "Do you think we should cancel the opening?"

"No," said Peter. "It's better that you go ahead with your event, as planned. You can't live in fear of these people. But you'll have to beef up your security. After the *Bugle* article comes out this afternoon, the police will probably want to talk

with you about the exhibit. Maybe they can even help with security.''

Richard brightened slightly. ''And maybe all this publicity will give the exhibit a boost.''

Mary Jane smiled. ''Always looking on the bright side, aren't we, Richard?''

''You grab publicity wherever you can find it,'' Richard said. He managed a brave smile, but it was obvious that he was worried.

''Can you think of a reason why somebody would want to steal this kind of art?'' asked Peter. ''Apart from the money, that is.''

''The money is the least of it,'' answered Helene. ''There aren't many places where you can sell these pieces, and there are a lot of fakes floating around, especially in the terra cottas. You have to know what you're doing and be very well-connected to collect pre-Columbian art. The countries of origin aren't letting any more of it go out. They think all of it belongs back there.''

''Well, *there's* a motive,'' said Mary Jane. ''Could some nationalists be trying to steal it back to its rightful place?''

Richard shook his head. ''Not likely. If they try to exhibit it, everyone will know.''

''Are there any other major collections of pre-Columbian art in the city?'' asked Peter.

''A few private collections,'' answered Helene. ''Some of them are contributing to our exhibit. Why do you ask?''

''Do you think I could get a list of their names and addresses?'' said Peter. ''It would help in the *Bugle*'s investigation. Maybe even create a bigger buzz about the gallery when people learn that you were watching out for your patrons.''

''You've got a point,'' said Richard. ''I have that information at the gallery. I'll give it to you after we're done here.'' He moaned softly and rolled his eyes. ''Why didn't I go into investment banking, like my father wanted me to?''

''Come on,'' said Mary Jane, grabbing a menu and tossing

back her mane of red hair. "Let's eat, drink, and be merry. You're *still* going to have the biggest gala opening of the season!" She lifted her glass, along with everyone's spirits. "To the Blue Dolphin Gallery."

"To the Blue Dolphin Gallery," they repeated gratefully. It was impossible to be glum with Mary Jane around.

As lunch was served, the topic of conversation shifted from art thefts to memories of the time Mary Jane, Helene, and Richard spent together on a trip to Paris, a few years before MJ married Peter.

Peter paid only partial attention to the discussion, his thoughts concentrated on the approaching gallery opening. Mary Jane was right—he *did* have an ulterior motive for encouraging the Carthams to go ahead with the opening. If the killers of Alexander Baldauf were after pre-Columbian art collections, there was no way they could pass up the opportunity to raid the exhibition—the prize was far too tempting.

And when they eventually struck—as Peter was certain they would—the thieves would find a friendly, neighborhood security guard waiting for them.

Spider-Man swung from a narrow strand of webbing as strong as steel cable, as the night wind whispered against the red-and-blue fabric encasing his wiry body. Through the concrete-and-glass canyons of Manhattan, he swung along in an easy rhythm, utterly fearless, utterly at home.

The Blue Dolphin Gallery was located on Seventy-seventh Street and Madison Avenue, an area known for its plentiful number of small art galleries. It was also an area known for its exorbitant rents, trendy coffee shops, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art on Fifth Avenue.

Somersaulting gracefully, Spider-Man released his web-line as he reached Seventy-seventh Street and dropped down to perch on a flagpole ten stories above the bustling street. The temperature had fallen ten degrees since sunset, and the cold March winds were biting through the thin material of the web-slinger's costume. Spidey rubbed his arms to keep the circu-

lation going, and glanced down at the gallery across the street.

There was an unmarked cop car in front of the gallery, parked blatantly in a no-parking zone. The big sedan had that cheap, one-color paint job that unmarked patrol cars always had.

Spidey shot a web-line at the balcony of an apartment in a building next to the gallery and swung across the avenue. Landing on the roof of the gallery, he ran to the rear of the building and began climbing down. At the rear entrance of the gallery he found a small grated window through which he could peer inside.

A dozen people were at work—painting, hanging lights, doing whatever was needed for the new installation. Spidey didn't see Richard, but Helene was front and center, talking to two police officers and going over photos. One of the cops was Detective Lucille Henshaw.

Doesn't look like much is going on tonight, thought Spidey. *Then again, with all the police presence, the thieves will probably avoid the gallery for a while.*

Spidey climbed back up to the roof, and was soon sailing among the skyscrapers, headed south. Richard had given him a list of three local collectors of pre-Columbian art. His first stop was the midtown apartment of Edna Ferlingham, an elderly woman known for her longtime patronage of the arts. Ferlingham had taken an interest in South American artworks a few years ago, and had wasted no time in forming an impressive collection.

As Spider-Man neared the home of Edna Ferlingham, a warning from his spider-sense began to creep up along his spine.

"Looks like I might have found who I'm looking for first night out," Spidey said to himself. "I bet Iron Man doesn't get lucky breaks like this too often."

Spidey softly landed on the roof of the apartment building and looked around. He was a little surprised to find a gargoyle stationed at each corner of the old building. Leaping across the roof, he landed behind the gargoyle stationed on the north-

east corner, half-expecting the beast to whirl around and attack. But its muscular back remained only intractable, weather-beaten stone.

Spider-Man swung over the lip of the roof and landed in a crouch on a balcony below. Warm air drifted out from an open door that led into a darkened apartment.

Spider-sense is buzzing like a stuck doorbell, Spidey thought, *and the cause of it seems to be this apartment. Let's see what's setting it off.*

Creeping up to the door, Spider-Man gave it a slight push. The door swung in on well-oiled hinges . . . to reveal a scene from a demented Renaissance painting.

The apartment was a shambles, its antique furnishings smashed to kindling. Glass cases had been overturned, their contents scattered across the room. Paintings had been torn from their wall mountings and savagely ripped to shreds.

And in the center of this chaos stood a group of shadowy, winged creatures. Their glowing red eyes focused on the colorfully-garbed intruder on the balcony.

Spidey bounded into the room. "All right, which one of you is Edna Ferlingham?"

Hissing, the creatures glared at the web-slinger, but made no move to attack.

"What's the matter, boys?" Spidey asked flippantly. "Too shy to ask for the first dance?"

A blur of motion off to one side caught the web-slinger's attention. He turned in time to see one of the creatures rushing at him from the shadows. Unable to move in time, Spider-Man was caught across the jaw by his assailant's claws. The blow sent the wall-crawler crashing into a heavy stone statue. Despite the statue's solid construction, it easily shattered under the impact of an airborne web-slinger.

Spider-Man shook his head to clear it and slowly rose to his feet.

"Where are your flippant remarks now, Spider-Man?" said a husky, accented female voice from the darkness. "Where is

the humorous commentary during your battles that I've heard so much about?''

From a well-lit bedroom stepped a stunningly beautiful woman with luxurious black hair, olive skin, and an exotic face. Her pale evening gown flowed along her voluptuous body like a coat of moonlight. In one hand, she held a large canvas bag containing a number of art pieces.

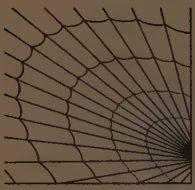
''I take it you have all the proper licenses for these pets, Miss?'' Spidey asked, gesturing toward the shadowy creatures.

''They are not pets, fool,'' the woman growled, her comely features twisted in rage. ''These are my friends—my followers.''

The beautiful woman pointed at Spider-Man and shouted, *''Matalo!''*

Spidey remembered just enough high-school Spanish to know that *''Matalo!''* meant ''Kill him!''

CHAPTER 3



Spider-Man dropped into a crouch, preparing for the attack.

They came from every direction, leaping over the furniture like a pack of frenzied baboons. Spidey shot a tangle of webs that enveloped the first wave, and they went crashing to the floor, bound head-to-toe like mummies. But these were nimble, winged creatures. The ones in the rear flew over their fallen comrades to pounce on Spidey and drive him into the plush carpet.

One nightmarish creature lunged for his neck; he held the creature at arms' length, gaping at its deadly fangs. These things were unlike any animal he had ever seen—they were nothing but spines, scales, wings, and wiry muscles. Individually, they were weak fighters, but they were nasty in a pack.

"Girls! Girls!" quipped Spidey. "Behave yourselves! I promise *everyone* will get an autograph, if you'll just be patient!"

Spidey kicked out with both feet, knocking three of the creatures across the room into a china cabinet. The crash which followed was deafening, and shattered dishware rained down onto the floor.

Spider-Man leaped to the relative safety of the high ceiling to put some distance between himself and his grotesque assailants.

"You only prolong the inevitable, webbed one!" said the mysterious, dark-haired woman. "You will not leave this place alive!"

"You know, lady," replied Spidey, "you *really* have to work on that attitude problem of yo—"

A soft moan from the shadows caught Spider-Man's attention. Looking to the far side of the room, he spotted an elderly woman lying on the floor.

Must be Edna Ferlingham, Spider-Man thought. *She's still alive. But she won't be for long if I don't get her out of here.*

Distracted by the sight of the unconscious woman, the wall-

crawler failed to notice the quartet of bizarre creatures that flew up behind him to continue the battle. Before he could respond to the shrill warning of his spider-sense, the creatures pounced. Their combined weight knocked him off the ceiling and sent him crashing to the floor.

Dazed by the impact, Spidey spun around, trying to throw off his attackers, but they clung tenaciously, ripping at his protective clothing.

"Hey, lay off the costume!" growled Spidey. "These things cost money!"

Lashing out wildly, Spider-Man's fists flew out like fiery pistons, landing powerful blows to the creatures' faces and bodies. The gargoyle-like assailants staggered under the attack. Off to one side, the dark-haired woman controlling the creatures continued to bark orders in Spanish like some sort of demented football coach.

The gargoyles were momentarily out of action, but the first wave of creatures were already gnawing and slashing their way out of the webbing that encased them. Spidey realized that he couldn't fight ten monsters and save the wounded woman at the same time. He had to make a choice.

Leaping across the room, he landed beside Edna Ferlingham, then scooped her up in his arms. The winged creatures—now free of the webbing—surrounded him, blocking his way to the balcony.

"Hey, look, guys," said Spidey, "this has been fun, but I've got someone here in need of some immediate medical attention. You wouldn't want to just surrender, would you?"

The dark-haired woman laughed, a sharp, barking note. "You are a fool, Spider-Man . . . and now you will die as one!" She looked to the gargoyles. *"Ataque! Matalo!"*

Before Spidey could move, all of the creatures pounced on him at once. He battled back as best he could with one hand, but the burden of the unconscious woman he was holding with the other made it difficult to put up much of a fight. Spidey didn't want to simply toss her aside, so both of them were knocked to the floor.

The creatures leapt on Spider-Man and relentlessly pummeled him. His struggles became weaker, and spots danced in front of his eyes. Razor-like claws and sharpened fangs tore at his flesh, and Spider-Man smelled the fetid breath of one of the gargoyles as it bent down, preparing to sink its teeth into his unprotected throat.

But then, mercifully, Spidey heard the sound of police sirens converging outside the apartment building.

"*Vamos!*" hissed the mystery woman.

Like darkness being chased away by the sunlight, the nightmarish monsters retreated to the window. Groggily, Spider-Man staggered to his feet to give chase.

But when he reached the balcony, there was no sign of the bizarre beings or their beautiful leader. They had simply vanished into the night. Spider-Man gazed upward, but the sky was clear of any flying figures.

"This isn't over yet," the web-slinger muttered to himself. "Not by a longshot."

A bright searchlight swiveled in his direction. Spidey ducked back into the apartment before the light could catch him in its beam.

The battle had trashed the apartment pretty well. Even though some clay figures lay smashed on the floor, it was clear that the burglary had been a success. Spider-Man knelt beside Edna Ferlingham and felt for a pulse—it was weak, but it was there. The web-slinger noticed puncture wounds on her throat.

"Definitely not Morbius' work," he commented.

There came a loud pounding on the door. "Police! Let us in!"

That was Spider-Man's cue to exit. With one leap, he sailed out through the balcony door and into the night.

"Ow!" groaned Peter as Mary Jane applied iodine to the cuts on his back and shoulders.

"I think some of these cuts could use stitches," she said.

"I can't go to the hospital," he grumbled. "When they ask me how it happened, what would I tell them?"

Mary Jane smiled. "You have an overly enthusiastic wife?"

"That's true, but I doubt the doctor would go for it." Peter flopped down on the bed, feeling exhausted. "Those things beat me tonight, and I don't even know what they *are.*"

"You didn't get a good look at them?"

"No," said Peter. "It was dark. If one of them walked through that door right now and sat down for tea, I still wouldn't know what it was."

"And you said there was a human with them?" asked MJ.

"Yeah," muttered Peter.

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Her," corrected Peter. "And she was definitely the leader. She ordered them around in Spanish—told me they were her followers."

"What kind of followers?" asked MJ. "Like a cult?"

Peter shrugged. "I haven't the slightest idea."

"Hmmm," said Mary Jane with concern on her lovely face. "Should we tell Helene and Richard to cancel the opening? It's the day after tomorrow."

"No," said Peter. "I want another crack at those things. Next time, I'll be prepared."

Mary Jane raised a quizzical eyebrow. "So, *that's* why you want them to go ahead with the opening. You want to use the exhibit as bait for the thieves."

"Uh . . . well . . . yeah," Peter said sheepishly.

Mary Jane tossled Peter's dark-brown hair. "Why didn't you just say that from the beginning, Tiger? Afraid I'd be angry with you for wanting to exploit my friends?"

"Something like that," replied Peter. "Sorry, MJ."

"Well, maybe I *should* be angry," Mary Jane said. She put on a pouty expression, which made her look even sexier. "Helene and Richard are old friends of mine. I don't think it's fair to put them at risk just because your pride's been wounded."

Peter sighed. "You're right, MJ. But I can't think of a better way to get another crack at them before they try to kill someone else."

Mary Jane sat quietly for a moment, then nodded. "All

right, Peter, but I want us to sit down with Helene and Richard to discuss this."

"And how do we let them know about what I'm planning?" asked Peter. "Without giving away my secret identity, that is."

"Well, a lot of people know that you have some kind of relationship with Spider-Man," said Mary Jane. "That's how you usually explain how you get all the great shots of him. We tell Helene and Richard that Spider-Man asked for your help in setting up a trap."

Peter smiled. "That's brilliant, MJ!" Sitting up, he gave Mary Jane a peck on the cheek.

Mary Jane flashed a wicked little smile. "I come up with a brilliant plan that saves your secret identity, and that's the best thanks you can come up with?"

Peter pulled Mary Jane closer and nuzzled the nape of her neck.

"Oh, no," he murmured softly. "I can do *lots* better than that . . ."

The next morning, Mary Jane left early for another modeling agency interview, and Peter caught the local news on TV. He was relieved to hear that Edna Ferlingham had survived her wounds. Happily, she didn't remember anything about Spider-Man being present during the melee in her apartment, and she gave the police a decent description of her assailants.

Of course, saying you were attacked by fanged, winged, reptilian monsters didn't endear you to the police. They had no idea where to round up suspects who matched that description, not even in this city.

By the time the newscast was over, Peter's phone was ringing. It was J. Jonah Jameson.

"Parker!" the publisher growled. "I *thought* I'd find you loafing when there's news to be covered! What are you doing, sitting around? Why don't I have pictures of those weird reptile things everyone's talking about?"

"I'll get right on it, Jonah," said Peter.

"Good," Jameson replied gruffly.

Peter barely had time to move the receiver away from his ear before Jonah slammed his own phone down, breaking the connection.

Peter sighed and rose stiffly from the couch. His bruises and cuts still hurt, and he hadn't even tried to put on a shirt, let alone his Spidey suit.

It was not going to be a pleasant day.

The sun was just setting as Spider-Man arrived back at the Blue Dolphin Gallery. A day of crisscrossing Manhattan for any sign of the grotesque thieves and their shapely leader had only resulted in the web-slinger's intervention in a purse-snatching, two attempted bank robberies, and a short-lived battle with a loser named the Candy Man, who used high-powered airguns to fire hardened sweets at his enemies. Unfortunately for the Candy Man, the villain had a jaw about as solid as spun sugar. A light tap from Spidey's knuckles, and the battle was won.

From a rooftop across the street from the gallery, Spider-Man watched various workers, artists, and carpenters come and go, their movements supervised by the Carthams. Since his spider-sense would warn him of any approaching danger, it wasn't necessary for the wall-crawler to leave his position and scout the area. With a sigh, Spidey settled back to stand watch.

It was about as exciting as watching paint dry.

He wasn't alone in his vigil. Two uniformed rent-a-cops were in evidence, one at the front door and one just inside the gallery, and they were relieved every four hours. Blue-and-white patrol cars prowled frequently past the upscale address, and there were plainclothes detectives parked across the street. It was clear that the police were taking no chances with the valuable collection.

In fact, they were taking no chances with *any* pieces of pre-Columbian art. As Peter Parker, Spidey had dropped by the

Daily Bugle and chatted with Ben Urich. The reporter explained that the police had encouraged the other collectors on the Carthams' list of patrons to store their valuables in secure locations until the thieves were caught.

Now, if I were a smart super-villain, thought Spider-Man as he looked at the Blue Dolphin Gallery, *I'd think twice about robbing this place. But those gargoyles didn't strike me as being the brainy type, and that woman with them seemed a bit too single-minded to let something like a platoon of cops stop her. I'm betting they'll wait until the exhibition's set up. That way, they'll have the opportunity to get everything they're looking for.*

Spidey shivered as a gust of wind ripped across the rooftop.

I almost wish they'd take a shot at it tonight, he thought. *Hanging around on a roof in the middle of March and freezing my butt off isn't exactly my idea of a good time.*

Another frigid blast whipped past the web-slinger, and he huddled into a tight ball.

Ah, the glamorous life of a super hero, Spidey thought ruefully. *Hope the exhibit opening tomorrow night goes better than this . . .*

Peter Parker grimaced as the terrible collar of pain choked his neck, cutting off the circulation to his brain. He felt lightheaded, certain he would pass out from the cruel and inhumane device. He tried to rip it off, but the fiendish contraption just sunk deeper into his flesh.

"Mary Jane!" Peter groaned, gripping the starched, pointy collar of his tuxedo shirt. "Do I have to wear this thing?"

"Yes," Mary Jane answered, turning back to the bathroom mirror to adjust her eye make-up. She looked spectacular, of course, in a silver, off-the-shoulder, floor-length evening gown that hugged her body like scales hugged a fish.

"It's not fair," said Peter. "You get to look glamorous and comfortable, while I have to encase myself in this monkey-suit."

"But you make such a handsome-looking monkey," MJ

said playfully. She lightly kissed him on the lips, then used her thumb to wipe away the lipstick imprint she'd left behind.

"Ook ook," said Peter, scratching under his arms and sticking out his bottom lip. Mary Jane giggled.

Peter fussed with his stiff jacket and cummerbund, hoping to give himself a little breathing room. He had to admit that he must have put on a few inches of muscle around his chest, neck, and shoulders since he last wore the tuxedo.

"You know, I've got a black suit . . ." Peter said hesitantly.

"So does everybody," answered MJ, "but the invitation said black *tie* not black *suit*."

Peter sighed, giving up a battle that was clearly lost. "Did you talk to Helene and Richard? How are they?"

"Frazzled. But the police have told them not to worry about the opening—they've got everything covered."

"The police always say that," sniffed Peter.

"Well, the police have made Helene and Richard feel better, and they've got enough to worry about. They don't know that Spider-Man has been looking out for them, too. *I'm* appreciative, even if they aren't."

Finished with her eye make-up, MJ straightened Peter's stiff bow tie. He put his hands on her sequined hips and gazed into her green eyes.

"You look exhausted," MJ said, clearly concerned.

"And you look absolutely luscious, pretty lady," said Peter, smiling. "But don't worry about me. Nothing like a night on an ice-cold rooftop to make you feel like a new man."

"I'll take your word for it," Mary Jane said wryly.

Peter started to stretch, but his tuxedo jacket tightened across his shoulders, and his collar began to choke him again. He wouldn't need much incentive to change into the Spider-Man costume he was wearing under his tuxedo if there was trouble.

"Security will be tight," said Mary Jane, "so make sure you bring the invitation. We can't get in without it."

Peter tapped his breast pocket. "I've got it. I don't want to miss this show."

"Well, you look presentable," said Mary Jane, assessing her husband's appearance. "Let's go mingle with the beautiful people."

Twenty minutes later, Peter didn't feel quite so bad about wearing his tuxedo—even the bouncer at the door of the Blue Dolphin Gallery was wearing one. The man's monkey-suit looked at least two sizes too small for him, and his gruff demeanor made it clear that he wasn't exactly a patron of the arts.

Probably one of New York's finest, Peter thought.

The officer carefully scrutinized each invitation as it was presented to him, which only increased the length of the line running down Seventy-seventh Street. The waiting invitees fidgeted, partly to try and keep warm, but mostly because the party inside the gallery was in full swing and they were missing out on the fun. Through the large windows that faced Madison Avenue, Peter could see people eating, laughing, ogling the artwork, and swilling champagne. It looked packed already, with more people arriving every second. Peter had to admit that the glitzy evening dresses and shiny tuxedos *did* lend an air of sophistication to the event.

The slow-moving line gave the paparazzi a chance to take their photos, and Mary Jane flirted with the cameras. She had the kind of face that people recognized—even if they didn't know her name—and the kind of figure that men never forgot.

Finally reaching the door, it was clear to Peter that the officer hadn't even registered his presence. The cop's eyes went from Mary Jane to the invitation and back to Mary Jane.

She smiled pleasantly and asked, "Do we pass muster?"

"Absolutely," the officer said, nodding enthusiastically.

Peter smiled. He could travel incognito anywhere in the world, as long as Mary Jane was with him.

Once inside the crowded gallery, MJ flew straight across the room to where Helene and Richard were holding court. She immediately claimed the center of attention for a few moments, then graciously handed it back to the hosts of the eve-

ning. A three-person video camera crew from one of the local television stations stalked the gallery, chasing away a few guests and attracting others.

Peter hung back to survey the room. Except for the door to the street, there was nowhere to escape from the press of people, and he was beginning to get worried. This space seemed so large when it only had a dozen workers in it. Now with a couple hundred people shoulder-to-shoulder, plus beverage bars and food service tables every few feet, it presented too many security problems. He relaxed a little when he saw uniformed guards stationed around the room and two more at each door.

Hopefully, a show of force like this will be enough to keep those gargoyles away, Peter thought. *But somehow I doubt it.*

Peter allowed the flow of the crowd to carry him toward the exhibit pieces. Grabbing a fancy cracker full of caviar from one of the catering tables along the way, he waited patiently in line to see the glass cases. He had to admit some disappointment, because the pre-Columbian portion was a small fraction of the total works on exhibit, most of which were modern and had a Native American motif. The rest of the art was for sale, of course, and he assumed that little or none of the ancient artifacts were for sale.

Only when Peter reached the front of the line and had a moment to scrutinize the pre-Columbian works did he realize how precious they really were. He pressed his nose against the glass, like a little boy at the candy counter. There were a few good-sized terra cota pieces, but most of the art was delicate and exquisite. The squat animals, gods, and humans were frightening, in a stylized sort of way, but all were incredibly vivid.

The materials of their construction varied greatly, from clay, turquoise, and jade to the purest gold and silver. Peter could well imagine how the conquistadors, upon getting a look at the golden figurines, had decided to grab them all. Gazing at them, Peter got the impression of a complex people who were alternately stern and fanciful, kind and brutal.

There was only one piece that was neither sculpture nor jewelry. It wasn't actually a painting—more like a folded-up poster. Detailed, colorful drawings depicted what seemed to be everyday events—coronations, dancing, traveling—with strange doodles along the margins and above the heads of the participants. When Peter read the legend on the placard, he found that he was actually looking at a book painted on leather pages, called a codex. This one was Aztec, and it was only a fragment, four pages to be exact. It came on loan from the collection of a Spanish monastery.

After reading that descriptive placard, Peter eagerly read all of the legends. He learned that many of these works had lain buried in the earth for five hundred to a thousand years, coming to light during excavations in the early part of the twentieth century. Most of the legends noted that the work was on loan from anonymous owners.

Unexpectedly, Peter's spider-sense buzzed sharply. He whirled around, expecting to see a pack of horrible gargoyles leaping through the crowd. Instead, his amazed eyes came to rest on a beautiful, copper-skinned woman standing not ten feet away from him.

The same woman who was the leader of the gargoyles.

The dark-haired femme fatale acknowledged his interest with a sultry smile, then turned her attention back to the artwork.

Peter scanned the room, looking for some sign of her accomplices.

The ringleader's here, he thought, *so her pack of uglies can't be too far behind.* Peter watched as the woman slowly moved from one case to another, intently studying each piece. *Pretty bold of her, walking right into the middle of all this security. Then again, I'm the only person in the room who knows who she really is.*

"I don't remember *her* being listed as one of the exhibits," said a voice beside him.

Peter turned to see Mary Jane looking past him toward the mystery woman.

"Strictly business, hon," said Peter.

Mary Jane studied the woman for a moment, then turned to Peter. "Is that the woman you were telling me about?" she asked, her voice dropping so only Peter could hear her. "The one with the gargoyles?"

"Yes," answered Peter. "And if she's here . . ."

"Then her followers are here, too," Mary Jane concluded. She scanned the room. "I don't see anything like a winged monster. You think they're outside waiting for a signal?"

"I'm almost certain." Peter turned back to the artwork, so as not to appear too interested in the mystery woman. "Do you know who she is?"

"No, but Helene and Richard must know. They invited her."

"Can you find out?" asked Peter. "I'll keep an eye on her."

"I bet you will," MJ said playfully.

As Mary Jane sauntered off, Peter hovered protectively near the pre-Columbian art. He was hanging so close to it that he got a suspicious look from one of the guards. Peter pretended to read one of the placards, then moved on to the exhibits on another wall.

As he weaved through the crowd, Peter studiously avoided getting too close to the dark-haired woman.

She doesn't appear to be in any rush to rob the place, Peter thought. *Maybe she's casing it for later tonight, when it empties out.*

Mary Jane appeared at his shoulder with two glasses of champagne. "With that stern expression plastered on your face, you don't look like you're enjoying yourself," she whispered. "You look more like a cop than the cops do. At least hold this." She offered him a glass.

With a smile, Peter took the glass and pretended to sip. "So who is she?"

"Her name is Miranda Silva, a rich heiress from Mexico." Mary Jane sighed. "Helene says she's one of the gallery's best customers, although a fairly new one."

"It's not a coincidence that she's here," remarked Peter.

"Could she fit in with my theory about a nationalist trying to return the art to its proper home?" asked MJ.

"I suppose," answered Peter. "But why use a bunch of killer winged monkeys to help her out?" He shook his head. "No, MJ, I think there's something a lot . . . darker about her intentions for the artwork."

Mary Jane smiled. "I'm sure you'll figure it out, Tiger. You always do."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, pretty lady," said Peter. He looked around the room at the partygoers, then turned back to Mary Jane. "Why don't you go mingle and have a good time. I'll keep an eye on Salma Hayek here."

"You sure about that?" asked MJ.

"Go on," said Peter. "I can't imagine anything's going to happen tonight."

MJ gently squeezed his hand before she dashed off. Peter drifted through the crowd, trying to find a quiet corner where he could blend into the art. He noticed that Miranda Silva never moved more than ten feet away from the case where the pre-Columbian art was on display, and her dark eyes wandered frequently in that direction. Twice her eyes shot toward Peter, but he looked away each time.

A tinkling sound drowned out the high-class conversation in the gallery, and Peter noticed that people were tapping on their champagne glasses to quiet the crowd. Somebody was going to make a speech. Logically enough, the speaker was Richard.

"Helene and I just want to say a few words of thanks before we polish off these delicious hors d'oeuvres." There were polite chuckles, and Richard went on. "First, thanks to all of you for coming out tonight and making our 'Exhibit of the Americas' such a grand success. I would love to publicly thank the people who loaned us these breathtaking pieces of pre-Columbian art, but they've asked to remain anonymous. Under the circumstances, I quite understand.

"Those of us who exhibit art often accept risks and ex-

penses that the general public is unaware of. Security, insurance—you wouldn't believe. Frankly, this is the most difficult and expensive installation we've ever mounted in this space. But when I see all of you, enjoying historic artwork that has never been publicly shown in New York, I know that all of the trials and tribulations are worth it."

The guests applauded politely, and Peter hoped the kudos weren't premature. The opening was an unqualified success, but this exhibit still had a month to run.

Richard stroked his goatee and raised his glass. "To you, the cognoscenti of the—"

He never finished his speech, because at that moment, a wall exploded inward, showering the startled spectators in plaster and bricks. Through the resulting dust cloud could be seen a twisted, man-sized shape that growled ominously.

Peter's eyes widened in surprise. *That doesn't look like a gargoyle,* he thought. *Could that woman be working with a new player?*

Screaming in panic, the patrons scrambled out of the way as the beast strode toward them, its lengthy tail lashing back-and-forth like a giant metronome. Dressed in a frayed pair of purple pants and a torn and muddied white lab coat, the creature hissed sharply. Its mouth opened to reveal an arsenal of sharp teeth and a snake-like tongue that darted in and out. Its body covered by plates of green scales, the beast's red eyes blazed intensely.

It's the Lizard! Peter realized. He looked around the room. *Gotta find a place to change, stop the Lizard before somebody gets hurt.* Spotting the door to the men's lavatory, he started fighting his way through the stampeding mob.

Chaos ensued, with people crawling over each other to escape from the infamous creature. Tables and glasses crashed to the floor, and artwork tumbled off the walls. The Lizard simply crouched in his cloud of destruction, surveying all the avenues of havoc open to him.

"Hold it right there!" shouted one of the security guards,

drawing his sidearm from its holster. He trained his pistol on the fearsome monster.

The reptile swung his tail and whipped the gun out of the cop's hand before he could fire. With one leap, the Lizard was on top of the officer, stomping him into the floor. It picked up the officer and hurled him across the room, where he brought down a shelf of Zuni pottery.

"Pathetic mammal," the Lizard growled.

As screams rent the air, two undercover cops drew their pistols, and the other security guards closed in. They opened fire, but the bullets bounced harmlessly off the Lizard—its skin was as tough as armor plating.

"Your weapons are useless!" hissed the creature. It advanced on the cops, its razor-sharp claws ready to tear through flesh.

Before it could attack, however, a red-and-blue blur passed above the Lizard and landed gracefully between the humanoid reptile and its intended prey.

"Hey, Snake-Eyes," said Spider-Man, "I didn't know you were a patron of the arts. I would've thought you'd go more for stuffed alligators playing little banjos." He turned to the police officers. "Get out of here, guys. I'll handle this. You take care of the crowd."

The cops nodded and headed off to try and restore some order.

"Spider-Man!" growled the Lizard with a mixture of rage and pleasure. "I've waited far too long for an opportunity to destroy you!"

"I'm glad to see you, too," replied Spidey, sarcastically. "What brings you to New York this time of year, Lizzy? Little too cold for a guy like you, isn't it?"

The monster stalked him. Spidey kept his distance, alert for the slightest movement of his opponent's deadly tail.

"Kill him!" shouted an accented voice. "Kill him and be done with it before more of the police arrive to interfere!"

Spider-Man whirled around to see Miranda Silva smashing open one of the glass cases. Like a skilled shopper, she tossed

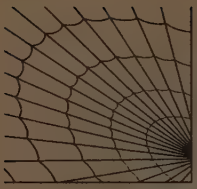
the precious codex and several gold figurines into a shopping bag.

That moment of distraction was all the opening the Lizard needed. The beast's tail whipped around, catching Spider-Man in the chest and throwing him across the room. The web-slinger slammed against a brick wall with a bone-crunching impact and collapsed to the floor.

The Lizard hissed with satisfaction. Claws extended, it strode toward its colorfully-garbed enemy. Spider-Man lay unmoving as the Lizard closed in on its prey.

"And now, human," it said with obvious glee, "you die!"

CHAPTER 4



Spider-Man's head pounded fiercely, and his vision was blurred. Still, as he slowly returned to consciousness to be greeted by the insistent buzzing of his spider-sense, he had enough wits about him to blindly shoot a net of webbing into the air. It snagged the Lizard just as he was charging in for the kill. Spidey rolled out of the way as the enraged creature crashed into the wall and fell to the floor, thrashing like a demon in the sticky strands.

In his dazed state, Spidey knew that he couldn't subdue the Lizard. All he could hope to do was keep innocent people from getting hurt. And maybe keep himself from being killed while he was at it.

While the Lizard roared insanely and tore at the webbing with its long claws, Spider-Man staggered to his feet. He gazed around the gallery. As far as he could tell, most of the patrons had fled, leaving the web-slinger alone with the Lizard and Miranda Silva. Spidey breathed a sigh of relief as he realized that Mary Jane had made it to safety.

A jolt from his spider-sense caused the web-slinger to duck. There was a green blur, and the Lizard landed in front of him.

"Now you die!" hissed the monster.

"You're starting to repeat yourself, Liz," quipped Spider-Man. "All that talking to reptiles you do is affecting your spee—"

The Lizard hurled himself at the wall-crawler, and the duo went down in a tangle of arms and legs. Spidey grabbed the reptile by the collar of its lab coat and tossed it into a corner.

Gotta get the Lizard out of here, Spidey thought, *before we wind up trashing all this priceless artwork. Maybe if I can get him to follow me . . .*

Spider-Man leaped for the ceiling just as the Lizard charged again. The wall-crawler scrambled across the ceiling toward the front door. The Lizard, clearly angered by the wall-crawler's actions, started after him.

"No, my lord!" cried Miranda Silva. "We have no time

for this! More policemen will be here any second!''

Spider-Man came to a sudden halt and looked down at the woman.

''*My lord?*'' he thought. *Why would she call the Lizard th—*

Before Spider-Man could finish the thought, the Lizard leaped into the air and smashed him off the ceiling with a swipe of its claws. The web-slinger crashed into a case near the front door. He gasped as glass slivers sliced through his costume and gouged his flesh.

Moving with lightning speed, the Lizard jumped on top of its enemy and began to pummel him with fists that struck like sledgehammers.

This isn't what I intended, thought Spidey as he weakly blocked the Lizard's claws as they sought his throat. Triggering his web-shooters, he shot a web into the Lizard's face. The creature roared in anger and staggered back, pulling at the adhesive.

Spider-Man moved in quickly, raining blow after blow upon the Lizard, but it was like punching a brick wall . . . and just as painful.

A jangle from his spider-sense caused the web-spinner to turn around just in time to see Miranda Silva coming at him with some sort of ceremonial knife taken from one of the exhibit cases. Her dark features were twisted with hatred, lips drawn back in an animalistic snarl. A well-aimed web-line shot out from Spider-Man's hands to wrap around Miranda's legs. She tripped and fell to the floor, the knife clattering away from the impact. The air was filled with a stream of Spanish invectives aimed at the wall-crawler, most of them dealing with his parentage.

With a deafening roar, the Lizard tore the webbing from its muzzle and charged. Spider-Man tried to leap aside, but the beast whirled and smashed him with its tail. Spider-Man bounced off a far wall like a basketball off a backboard.

Now he was really in pain—he could barely move. Spider-Man groaned loudly as he tried to rise. Pain lanced through him in blinding flashes.

Think that last shot bruised a rib or two, he thought hazily. *Can't just lie here . . . give the Lizard another shot at finishing the job . . .*

Rising unsteadily to his feet, Spidey braced himself for the Lizard's final attack.

But when he looked up, his foe was gone! The gallery was strewn with debris and smashed paintings. Miranda Silva was also gone, as were the pieces of art she had taken from the cases.

The sound of approaching sirens brought Spidey back to full consciousness.

Gotta get out of here, he thought. *I'm in no shape to answer questions about what this was all about. I'm not even sure* I *know what this was all about!*

Spider-Man staggered toward the men's room to retrieve his tuxedo, picking glass slivers out of his bruised body along the way. Once inside, he crawled through a window facing the rear of the building and made his way to the roof. Since there was no signal from his spider-sense—which would have alerted him if anyone was watching—Spidey removed his mask and began slipping into his tuxedo.

This woman's really ticking me off, Spider-Man thought. *Twice I try to stop her and her henchcreatures, and twice I get clobbered. And now the Lizard's involved. What's his connection? Or is* Curt Connors *the one who's connected?*

Curt Connors. Memories flooded Spider-Man's mind at the thought of the cursed scientist.

Once a well-respected herpetologist, Connors had created an experimental serum based on the blood of reptiles and their natural abilities to regrow limbs that had been cut off. Connors' hope was to use the serum to regrow the arm he had lost years before in warfare. Unfortunately, the serum did more than restore Connors' missing arm. It affected him both physically and psychologically, creating a new personality—a deadly, reptilian alter-ego that vowed to wipe out all of humanity.

The Lizard.

Over the years, Spider-Man and the Lizard had often tangled as the creature tried unsuccessfully to carry out its plans for world conquest. Usually, the wall-crawler won the day by using a serum that forced the Lizard to change back to Curt Connors. But each time, the serum took longer to work, and Connors' periods of humanity became shorter, as his system developed an immunity to the concoction.

The last time Spider-Man had seen Curt was in Florida, in an adventure involving the Lizard, Venom, and a group of mercenaries who were trying to blow up the space shuttle. When the criminals had finally been brought to justice, the tragic doctor went off to seek a cure, unwilling to put his wife, Martha, and son, William, at risk from the danger of the Lizard. Curt obviously hadn't succeeded in his search, because the Lizard was back, bigger and badder than ever.

His tuxedo looking a little worse for wear, Peter Parker climbed down to street level and made his way back to the gallery to find Mary Jane and make sure she was all right. He also wanted to talk to Helene and Richard, and apologize for the terrible advice he had given them.

Sure, go ahead and have your opening. There's nothing to fear. Peter frowned. *I hope their insurance was paid up. Maybe they have a special rider for super-villain damage.*

Peter shuffled down the street, looking as dazed as everybody else. He could feel bruises all over his face and a few tender ribs. Luckily, after a melee like that, nobody would question a few bruises.

"Peter!" cried a voice. From a clutch of bystanders, Mary Jane rushed over and gave him a crushing hug. He moaned from the pain.

"Peter, you're hurt!" MJ exclaimed.

"Mostly my pride," Peter whispered. "Are Helene and Richard all right?"

"Yes, they're over there." MJ pointed to a group of people who were gathered around a squad car, talking to the cops. Helene was waving her arms wildly as she described the chaotic events.

"When I get a chance, I want to apologize to them," muttered Peter. "I feel terrible about this."

"You couldn't have expected the Lizard to show up," said MJ sympathetically.

"Yeah," grumbled Peter, "but I was right about Miranda Silva. While the Lizard and I were tussling, she scooped up the art they'd come for."

"Are you going to tell the police about this?" asked Mary Jane.

Peter shook his head. "The Lizard and Spider-Man duke it out in the middle of an art gallery and the Lizard gets away with priceless items? They'd think I was his accomplice." He paused. "You said that Helene and Richard have been dealing with her. You think they'd be willing to give you her address?"

MJ thought for a moment. "If I can separate one of them from the police. I'll say she invited me over to discuss breaking into modeling, just before all hell broke loose."

With determination, Mary Jane headed back into the circle of people gathered around the flashing lights of the squad cars. A paramedic walked through the dazed crowd, asking if anybody needed medical attention. He gazed at Peter, expecting him to raise his hand, but Peter turned away and paced in the shadows, not wishing to talk to anybody. Both his pride and his body were still smarting.

He could take to the roofs and search for Miranda Silva, but she had already proved to be elusive and ruthless, leaving nothing to chance. He didn't think he would just blunder into her.

The Lizard was a different matter. In the past, it was usually easy to find—you just followed the trail of destruction. If there was a zoo or a swamp nearby, it would usually be there, gathering an army of fellow reptiles.

With a start, Peter realized the Lizard might have now assembled a decidedly different kind of army—one made of blood-sucking gargoyles. Could those monsters be the Lizard's new recruits? The thought gave Peter the shivers.

He looked up and saw MJ approaching, a bounce in her step and a smile on her face.

"Okay," she said in a low voice. "Miranda Silva always stays at the Kyoto Hotel on West Fifty-sixth Street when she's in town. That's the only address they have for her.

"By the way," she added, "Richard says she also has a private jet."

"Great," muttered Peter. "She might already be on her way back to wherever she lives by now. I'd better get over to the hotel right away, just in case she's still in town." He sighed and looked at his wife. "Sorry, MJ."

Mary Jane smiled wistfully and straightened the rumpled lapel of his tuxedo jacket. "Just come home in one piece, will you?"

"I promise, pretty lady." Peter smiled and shook his head. "All this over a bunch of artwork most people don't even know exists."

Peter strolled into the lobby of the posh and serene Kyoto Hotel. After changing into his Spider-Man costume on the rooftop of a building near the Blue Dolphin Gallery, Peter had stuffed his tuxedo into a webbing backpack and hurriedly swung down to the hotel. Now sweaty from his journey and attired in a tuxedo that had definitely seen better days, he hoped that the staff and guests wouldn't take notice of his rumpled appearance.

Peter walked up to the slab of marble that served as the front desk and politely waited his turn to see the clerk, an attractive Asian woman in a crisp dark-blue uniform.

"May I help you?" she asked Peter, trying hard not to look askance at him.

Peter flashed his most charming smile. "Hi. I'm looking for Miranda Silva."

"Your name, sir?"

"Peter Parker."

"One moment, sir." The clerk banged away at a computer keyboard for a few moments, then consulted her screen. "It

appears that Ms. Silva checked out this morning."

"Ah," said Peter, disheartened but not really surprised. So far, she was ahead of him every step of the way, and this was just one more. "Would you happen to have an address or phone number where she can be reached?"

"I'm afraid I can't give that information out."

Peter nodded. "I understand. Thanks for your help." He turned on his heel and exited the hotel.

Out on the sidewalk, Peter paused to consider his next move.

If I were a betting man, he thought, *I'd give odds that Silva's plane is taking off right about now. And she's probably got her gargoyle gang and the Lizard with her, as well. Not to mention all that artwork they stole.* Peter frowned. *But* why *only pre-Columbian art? Why not some of the more expensive, more well-known pieces in the victims' collections? And why is the* Lizard *mixed up in all this?*

Peter looked at his watch and saw that it was eleven o'clock. *Maybe I should just call it a night and go home. I'll head into the* Bugle *first thing in the morning and see if the research department has anything on Miranda Silva.* Peter winced as a passerby brushed against his sore ribs. *Yeah, going home sounds like a* very *good idea . . .*

An hour later, Spider-Man landed on the roof of the Forest Hills, Queens, home that he shared with Mary Jane and her aunt, Anna Watson—the same house where Peter Parker had lived with his aunt May and uncle Ben for years. Oddly, all the lights were on inside the living room, even though Mary Jane usually didn't bother to wait up for him.

Spidey peered through the window and saw his beloved in her bathrobe, sitting on the couch, talking to another woman whose back was toward him.

Who'd be visiting at this hour? Spidey thought.

Concealing himself in the shadows behind the house, Peter changed back into his tuxedo, then walked around to the front door and entered the modest home, reminding himself to look

surprised at having a guest at this hour. When he saw who it was, he was not all that surprised.

"Martha!" he said, embracing Curt Connors' wife. Several years older than he, she was a very attractive woman with light brown hair and a slim figure. Martha looked tired, as though she hadn't been sleeping well for quite some time.

"Peter," she said. "I'm sorry for coming here at this hour, without any warning."

"That's all right," he answered, guiding her back to the couch. He took an armchair and tried to look naive about her visit. "What are you doing here? Did you just fly up from Florida?"

Martha nodded. "Yes. I didn't know where else to go—I hope you don't mind that I came to you."

"Not at all," Peter said.

"Mary Jane was just telling me about Curt . . . attacking the art gallery." Martha grimaced, clearly disturbed by the news. "I-I know where Curt was before he came back to New York."

"Go on," said Peter.

Martha twisted her hands as she talked. "A few days ago, I received a package, postmarked from Mexico. It was a book—Curt's journal of his travels since that last incident at Cape Canaveral. It's been months since I've seen or heard from him. I didn't know what to do when I received the journal, so I came to you. I was hoping you could pass it along to Spider-Man. He might know what to do with it."

Martha reached into a voluminous travel bag by her feet and pulled out a thick spiral notebook, the kind sold in any drugstore. It was tattered and looked as if it had been dragged around the block a few times. With trembling hands, she held out the notebook as if it were the Dead Sea Scrolls, and Peter gingerly took it from her.

"You know for sure it's his handwriting?" asked Mary Jane.

"Unmistakably," answered Martha. "After Curt lost his right arm, he had to teach himself how to write with his left

hand. I'd know his pinched scrawl anywhere."

"May I read it?" asked Peter.

"Please." Martha sighed deeply.

Peter turned to Mary Jane. "Honey, why don't you find Martha a place to lie down." He held up the journal. "I'm gonna be up for a while."

"I was going to get a hotel room," said Martha, rising uncertainly to her feet.

"I wouldn't hear of it," said MJ. "You can stay in Aunt Anna's room—she's out of town for a few days."

"Thank you . . . both of you," said Martha, a small smile peeping up at the corners of her mouth.

"How's William?" asked Peter.

Martha shook her head in amazement. "He's getting so big. He's so self-sufficient that it's almost scary. Sometimes he seems older than his years."

"That's to be expected, I guess," said Mary Jane, escorting Martha to the bedroom. "I'll put on a pot of coffee for you, Peter. It looks like one of those nights."

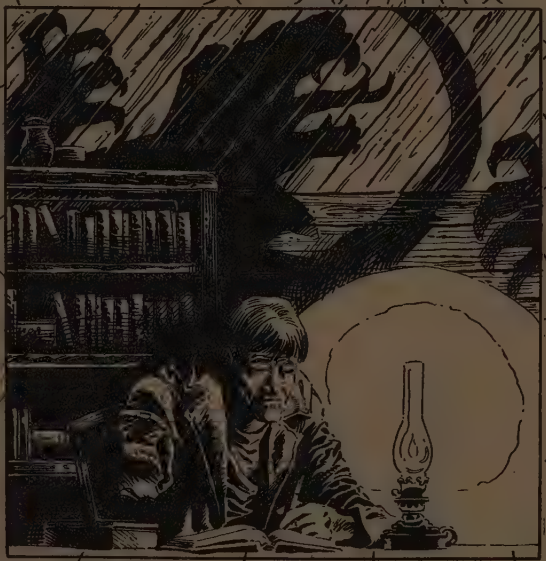
"Thanks." He rubbed his fingers over the grimy cover of the notebook. It looked as if it was as old as an Aztec codex, with the dust of centuries caked upon it. Yet the pages demanded to be read—this second.

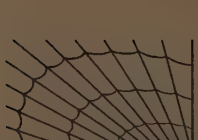
"I'll read it and tell you what I think," Peter said to Martha as she rose to follow Mary Jane out of the living room.

Peter sat back in his chair and opened the journal. At last, maybe he would get some answers, because he had a thousand questions. These robberies and attacks were strange enough, but the culprits were even stranger. The Lizard and a pack of gargoyles stealing historic artwork? It didn't compute. And why had Miranda Silva called the Lizard her "lord"? What kind of influence did she have over the creature?

Maybe the answers were right here, inside this grimy notebook. With itchy fingers, Peter turned to the first page of Curt Connors' journal.

CHAPTER 5





Day 1

I bought this notebook to keep a journal, a report of my travels. Right. Who am I kidding? I bought it to keep my sanity. I don't know how many entries I'll be able to make before the beast in me takes over again. I can never be sure what combination of chemicals, adrenaline, or electromagnetic stimuli may trigger that horrible reaction. I've voluntarily removed myself from family and friends, to protect them, and now I need to get even farther away from people. I don't know what will happen to me, but I want to leave a record of my last days.

Maybe, I keep telling myself, these won't be my last days. Maybe these are the first days of my journey to recovery. Science has failed me, but there are cures and methods beyond the realm of science. They are out there, in distant jungles and wilderness, kept alive by shamans and native people. I will find the cure for my self-inflicted curse, or die trying.

If you find this notebook, I ask that you send it to my loving wife, Martha Connors, 9112 Palm Leaf Terrace, West Palm Beach, Florida. She should know that my every thought is with her and our wonderful son, William. I never would have left them except to save them from a horror which no one should have to endure.

If you find a body near this notebook, please bury it. I can only hope it is human.

I suppose I should introduce myself, in case the reader is a stranger. My name is Dr. Curt Connors. I hope that name means nothing whatsoever to you, because I haven't sought fame. No one but a handful of people know my terrible secret. All my life, I only wanted to do my work and help peo-

ple, while being a good husband and father. But I was arrogant enough to try to change the laws of nature. For that, I have suffered greatly, and so have those who love me.

If you saw me now, you wouldn't think I was anything special—just a one-armed wreck of a man, sitting in a bus station along with the other dregs of society. I'm waiting for a bus to Corpus Christi, Texas, and everybody here is going somewhere west. I'm sure none of us could tell you why we think our lives will be any better in Louisiana, Mississippi, or Texas than in Florida, but we're all going, anyway. There is something in the human spirit that forces movement, especially when the stench of failure is hanging over a person's head.

Not long ago, I was a gifted surgeon who helped save the lives of hundreds of American soldiers on the battlefield. I had a great future ahead of me, until I picked up some shrapnel in my right arm from a phosphorous grenade. I was too busy helping others to attend to my own wounds, and gangrene set in. They had to amputate. I can still feel phantom twinges in the arm that isn't there. It wants to reach out, embrace my wife.

Losing my arm should have warned me that I could become too obsessive, even for a good cause. But that's been the story of my whole life. No matter what I achieved, I always tried to do more . . . until I did too much.

After the war, I naturally felt sorry for myself, but I had the love of a good woman to make me strong. I reversed direction and went into research, where I managed to make a reputation as a herpetologist. I've always been fascinated by reptiles, especially their ability to regenerate limbs. Once again, I should have known that I wasn't as altruistic as I thought I was. I was still obsessed with my own lost limb.

If only I had been content with what I had, because I had

so much! Beside me stood the best woman in the world, and we had William, who was a constant joy. Maybe I didn't have fame and wealth, as I had planned, but I had the respect of my peers and the love of my family. Why couldn't I be happy with that?

But no, there was part of me missing, and I couldn't get past that fact. I wanted my arm back! Always, in the back of my mind, I wondered if a reptile's ability to regrow a tail or a leg could be transferred to humans. I bred lizards with extraordinary abilities, and I isolated their specific genes and DNA. From the lizards' own tissue, I created a serum designed to bring back my arm. There would be huge benefits for the whole world if I were successful, but I was being selfish, not altruistic.

I never should have experimented on myself, but I was eager to restore my arm. How many times have I relived that first terrible night? The first transformation into . . . that thing.

The Lizard.

If I could just go back and hurl that vial into the sink, I would do so without hesitation. But I can't. That night happened, and it was the precursor of many terrible nights to follow.

At first I was thrilled, because my arm *did* grow back. But it kept changing, mutating, until my whole body was affected. I became something else, something deadly. Destructive. Insane.

And forever lost myself.

The boarding announcement for my bus has just been made: "Mobile, Alabama; Biloxi, Mississippi; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Houston, Texas; all points west."

That's me, "all points west." The farther away from people and the life I've known, the better.

Day 2

I'm sitting in a truck stop, on the road somewhere. I breezed through southern Alabama and southern Mississippi, where the moss hangs from the oak trees like a widow's veil. The blossoms of spring will come soon to enliven this land, but now it is a gray swamp, soaking up the drizzling rain. I'm in the country now, but there are still too many people for my tastes. After I reach Houston tomorrow, I'll be done with big cities. I've decided to make my way down the tip of Texas to the border.

I don't know why the Mexican border should attract me as it does. I suppose I view it as a gateway to something more real and earthy than the sterile laboratories where I've spent the last few years of my life. Countless times, I've created serums which brought me back to humanity, but all of them failed in the end—even the last one, which looked so promising.

These failures only increase my determination, and my desperation. I must search beyond the narrow confines of science and medicine to find more natural methods. If I fail again, I'll be so far away that it won't matter. My family won't be ashamed to read about my exploits as that monster.

My money will run out soon. Luckily, I can play on my one-armed veteran status to pick up a few bucks here and there, maybe even a meal and a place to sleep. Just this morning, I offered to sweep up the floor of another diner in exchange for breakfast, but the owner insisted on giving me a free meal. I hate trading on my missing arm, but it might as well be good for something. When I tell people part of my story, they call it a great tragedy.

If they only knew how tragic . . .

The only person who has ever understood my condition—beside Martha and William, of course—is Spider-Man. I

don't know who he is behind that mask, but I'm forever grateful for his help. Many times he's saved my life and kept me from doing harm to others, and I've only repaid him with treachery.

No, that's not true. I'm not the one who continues to be a thorn in his side. It's the thing I've become.

The driver is calling us back to the bus. I've got to keep moving, got to get farther and farther away. Besides, it's easier to sleep on a bus than on a wooden bench in a drafty bus station.

Day 3

I'm on my own now, dropped off in Corpus Christi, Texas. It's not really a border town, but it feels like one—the beginning of a vast land that doesn't conform to the Anglo-Saxon way of looking at things. The people are darker and shorter; they speak a foreign language. They don't seem to have as much pity for a man with a folded sleeve instead of an arm, because they know that life is hard and dangerous. What I've discovered is something they've known for centuries.

Their fatalism appeals to me, as I sit here in a rambling open-air market at the side of the road, drinking a warm cola. Chickens and geese are squawking, and indian fry bread is sizzling in the grease behind me. The vendors are selling everything from kitchen goods to snorkeling equipment, with an emphasis on children's shoes and fresh vegetables. I find that I remember more Spanish from high school and years of living in south Florida than I thought I had. If forced to speak the language, I can get along, if they speak slowly enough.

Even though I miss Martha and William terribly, I feel safer here than I did in Palm Beach, where I was always struggling to maintain the appearance of a normal life. All that

effort, and none of it worked. After the experiment, my life was never normal, and the stress was unhealthy. It changed my body chemistry and made me susceptible to the unspeakable change which comes over me.

I feel guilty when I think that I've deserted Martha and William, but what good could I do them? Unable to work, unable to think, unable to control myself. Just when I would get my life back on track, some small accident would start the horror all over again. No, this is the best way—for all of us.

I must fight the temptation to call Martha, or even write her. We have clever friends, such as Peter Parker, who would help her track me down. No one must find me, until I'm cured. Or dead.

I'm about to go over and introduce myself to some truck drivers. They have small vegetable trucks which are now empty, and maybe I could ride in the back. By their license plates, I think they are headed south. Wish me luck.

Peter closed the journal, although he kept his thumb on his place. To read about Curt's desperate and misplaced hopes was painful, because he already knew that the Lizard had triumphed. There might be nothing left of the hard-working family man named Curt Connors, except for these final words.

With dread, Peter reopened the notebook.

Day 4

I've found a little border town, Punta Roja, not far from Brownsville. I got in here late last night, thanks to the farmers I met outside Corpus Christi. One of them, named Armando, took me to his farm and offered me a place to stay in his shed, in exchange for some light chores. Armando speaks English fairly well, but I'm trying to practice my Spanish

before I head into Mexico. Then again, I may travel so far away from people that I won't need to know any language at all.

You wouldn't call Punta Roja a pretty town, but it's simple and functional. It's a small place, probably no more than a hundred people, mostly farmers and farm workers. Most of the people live in brightly colored cinder-block houses, surrounded by chicken coops, livestock pens, and clotheslines. Except for the main road through town, all of the roads are dirt. So far, I've seen a *cantina* and a little grocery store, where they sell the staples of life—rice, beans, and camaraderie.

To the south of town is the Rio Grande, swollen by winter rains. The town is surrounded by endless fields of lettuce and corn, and the only trees are in a grapefruit orchard on a hill overlooking the town.

Punta Roja is not an official border crossing, but I've seen the run-down fences that stretch along the river bank. Those fences wouldn't keep anyone out. *La migra*—the Immigration and Naturalization Services police—are a strong presence in town with their white vans, but everyone acts as if the border is nonexistent. They see this as all one land, one people, with an arbitrary fence running down the middle.

With only one arm, I can't really do heavy work in the fields, but there's plenty to do around Armando's house. I fed the chickens, goats, horses, and Armando's lone pig, then I watered his wife's herb garden and swept the barn and the storage shed, which is serving as my quarters. I also repaired the scarecrow who guards the vegetable garden; he's made out of plastic pipes.

There's no money to pay me, but I'm thankful for four walls and three hot meals. As long as I have this journal, my back-

pack, a flashlight, a hurricane lamp, a toothbrush, and a change of clothes, I won't lack for anything.

These are simple people, and simplicity is what I need at the moment. I want no responsibilities—no one making demands on me. The struggle to stay human is a basic one, and I want my life to be basic. I'm tempted to ask the locals if they know any *curanderas*—healers—or any *brujos*—witches. But I don't want them to think I'm prying, or snooping into their religion. For now, their friendship and hospitality are more than I deserve.

Under a high, waning moon, it's getting very dark outside, and even a little cool. My wooden shed doesn't provide a lot of shelter, but I have mounds of hay and a hand-woven wool blanket. With a full portion of *menudo* in my stomach, I'm ready for sleep. There is something to be said for manual labor, and the way it leaves the body feeling spent but honest.

Day 5

At lunch today, I worked up the courage to ask Armando about any *curanderos* or *brujos* who might be living in the area. When he looked suspicious and asked my reason, I simply pointed to my missing arm. That wasn't the whole truth, but it was a place to start. He considered my answer for a moment, then said we would take a walk after dinner.

All through dinner, I sensed a tenseness within Armando's family, as if I were crossing an invisible line. When Armando's wife, Pilar, picked up the dinner dishes, she gave me a look of concern, but said nothing.

Armando grabbed his flashlight, and I grabbed mine. We walked through his neat front yard and headed west into the sunset. The last rays of sunlight sliced salmon-colored arcs through the underbelly of the clouds. The only sound was laughter and music from the *cantina*. We skirted around the

unofficial town dump, and I only caught a few unpleasant whiffs.

Our feet crunching on the gravel, we climbed uphill, away from the village. Finally, Armando turned on his flashlight, but I kept my light out, for fear of interrupting the stillness and mystery of our silent journey.

I couldn't figure out where we were going until we climbed a decrepit fence and entered the grapefruit orchard. In this agricultural tract of the Rio Grande plain, the orchard was the closest thing to a forest, and it shielded our movements with a black canopy of leaves.

There was a heavy scent of citrus in the air, mixed with the stronger smells of decomposition and steer manure. Picking season was at hand, and hulking farm machines guarded the silent rows of trees. I felt as if we were kings walking through the columns of a great temple.

We walked for what seemed like miles, and I was both excited and fearful. What if I was subjected to something which altered my body chemistry and brought on . . . the beast? I could always feel it close at hand, too close. Then again, this was why I had come to this part of the world—to learn a different way of seeing things. Unseen creatures scuttled through the trees over my head, and an owl hooted nearby.

We strode through the cathedral of trees until we caught sight of a weak light glowing in the distance. Armando picked up his pace, and I did likewise, and we made a beeline toward the ghostly light, cutting diagonally through the trees. When we were a few feet from the light, I realized it was a candle swinging in a clay ball, hanging from a sturdy branch. Punctured full of holes to let the light escape, the clay lantern was beautiful in a crude way.

Armando stopped by the light and pointed his flashlight

beam down a well-trod path between the leaves. "You must go alone." I nodded and thanked him for his help

Armando stepped back, and I didn't know whether he was going to leave or wait for me. He looked as if he didn't trust me to go on by myself, so I trod bravely down the path, clutching my empty sleeve

After walking a few feet, the orchard became oddly quiet, except for my heartbeats and footsteps, which sounded deafening. Then I saw it through the trees—a little shack not much different than the one I was sleeping in. Who would know anyone was living way back here?

From the quivering lights within the shed, it seemed as if many candles were burning. I approached cautiously and pushed open the door. It was a one-room shack, furnished rather nicely with a tiny bed, neat curtains, and a small television set, which was turned on with no sound. One of those ubiquitous Mexican soap operas was playing, and I realized with a start that the TV had made the quivering light, not a mass of candles.

Only one candle burned in the entire room, a yellow tub of wax encased in glass. Beside it sat a similar black candle, which was not lit. Both candles rested on a small formica table, and I stepped closer and gazed into the feeble flame of the yellow candle. Around its blackened wick floated curious debris—sequins, glitter, clumps of incense, and charred bits of paper.

Something moved on the bed—I hadn't realized there was anyone in it. A small, wizened woman with jet-black hair streaked with gray jumped out of the bed and gazed fiercely at me, as if I had sneaked up on her. Her shoulders were rounded and stooped from years of working in the fields, and she walked with a slight limp as she pulled a frayed shawl around herself.

The old woman grabbed a glazed pot off the shelf and set it before me. I looked at the vessel and saw only a $10,000 bill in play money plastered to the bottom. You didn't have to hit me with a stick. I took out my wallet and dropped my last ten-dollar bill into the pot.

Ten bucks for a fortune-telling sounded reasonable. I was never much given to superstition, but I was fascinated and fearful to hear what this wild-eyed woman would divine about me.

She beckoned me over to a rickety table and peered quizzically at me, as if I were an especially troubling case. She flipped over my lone hand to read my palm. Her face grew more concerned as she traced the lines. Finally she folded my fingers into my palm, as if closing a book.

"You are cursed," she said in Spanish.

I nodded.

"Who brought this on?"

"I did. Myself."

Her eyes widened. "You are a *brujo*?"

"Worse," I said with a wry smile. "I used to be a scientist. But no more. Now I'm just a poor man, a broken man. The curse has beaten me—taken everything from me."

The healer nodded solemnly, seeming to agree with the depth of my misery.

"There's nothing you can do for me. I should be going." I rose from my seat, but the woman grabbed my wrist. Her fingers felt hot and feverish against my skin.

"Wait," she whispered. "I have something for you."

She scurried to the back of her one-room dwelling and took a wooden box from under her bed. With her back hunched to keep me from seeing the box's contents, she removed an object and cradled it in her lap. I couldn't see the article through the voluminous folds of her dress, but I could

hear her talking to it, praying over it. With a contented smile, she rose from her bed and tossed the object onto the table.

It was a delicate snake skin, shed by a rattlesnake. Seeing such skins had once been a common occurrence for me, but now the artifact filled me with dread, because it seemed to mock my condition. That was *me* lying there—withered, desiccated, scaly.

"You must shed your curse the way the snake sheds its skin," she warned somberly. "It is part of you, and you must leave it behind—to become a new person, with new skin. The next time the curse comes over you, eat the snake skin."

"Eat the skin?" I asked doubtfully. I could barely bring myself to look at it, let alone touch it or eat it.

"A piece of it," she said sternly, like a doctor prescribing drugs. "Your body needs to know that change is possible. The new skin may look like the old skin, but it's never the same. When you have conquered the curse, you must bury what is left of the skin."

She ripped off a shred of the skin, and I feared for a moment that she would eat it. Instead she dropped the dried skin into the murky soup of her yellow candle, muttering an incantation under her breath. When she struck a match and lit the black candle, I started for the door.

"Take the skin!" she ordered.

With a trembling hand, I reached across the table for the withered tube of skin. It looked almost like a shrunken nylon stocking, delicate yet strong. I picked the skin up, and it was so light that its weight barely registered on my fingertips. I held it awkwardly, wondering where I should put it so that it wouldn't crumble.

Reading my thoughts, the healer produced a small leather pouch on a leather thong. Guiding my hand, she had me ball

the skin into a wad and deposit it in the pouch, then she guided the thong over my head.

I felt silly wearing a medicine pouch, like some New Age hippie. Was this why I had come to this place, seeking symbolic gestures and folk remedies? I supposed it was.

I moved toward the door, anxious to be on my way. This painful transaction had caused me to doubt my entire plan of going south, looking for some woo-woo cure.

There was a flare of light and a hiss, and I saw the woman throwing powder onto the flames of both candles; it sparked and flared for an instant before disappearing in a poof of smoke. Intently, the *bruja* crossed herself and began to pray loudly. I caught a few of her words this time.

"Save him," she said, "before he kills."

"What did you say?" I demanded.

She looked at me with black, bottomless eyes. "I asked the gods to protect you . . . before you kill again."

"I'm not a killer!" I roared, pounding the formica table. The candles wobbled, and the black one fell over, spilling black wax over the formica.

"*Vayase!*" she ordered in a stern but trembling voice. In case I didn't understand, she pointed toward the door.

I nodded and hurried into the darkness of the orchard. I almost ripped that stupid medicine bag off my neck, but the cool air and the citrus smells calmed my anger.

I walked back to the path and found Armando waiting for me. He nodded, looking very relieved, yet we spoke not a word as we walked back through the dusky orchard and the quiet town.

I had hoped that writing this account would help me understand what happened in that woman's house, but I feel more disturbed than enlightened. Looking at it symbolically, there's a lot to be said for the healer's advice to shed my

skin. If that means turning my back on everything associated with Dr. Curt Connors, so be it. It will be painful, but I must do it.

I'm exhausted and cold. It's time for sleep.

Day 7

Lord help me, I can't believe what I saw tonight! I'm writing this by the quivering light of my flashlight, and my nerves are so wired that I'm not sure this will be anything but gibberish. I won't be able to sleep the rest of the night, so I might as well put it down. What I saw defies description or understanding. It deeply affected me and nearly plunged me into my darkest despair. But it also gave me a strange hope.

I must collect my thoughts, so this will make sense to you. The day began at dawn as usual, and nobody commented on my visit to the healer the night before. In fact, I felt great all day and did twice the amount of work I had done on the previous days. I even cleaned and repaired the entire chicken coop and henhouse, which impressed everyone in the household.

I went to bed happy with my humble life. Striving for simplicity and a stress-free lifestyle was the way I should live, I decided, in some bucolic place like this village. Little did I know what was coming later that night.

It was the darkest, quietest part of the night, when we are always surprised that things are stirring. I heard noises coming from the henhouse—birds squawking and fluttering, banging into the boards I had so carefully repaired that day. I was now very possessive about the chicken coop, and I couldn't stand the idea of a coyote or a dog crashing my fortress. I knew one of the reasons I was sleeping out here near the animals was to keep watch on them. I listened, and

the panicked squawking sounded again, along with the snap of a board.

I rolled out of bed, ready to do battle. My bedding was so humble that I wore my clothes for warmth, so all I had to put on was my muddy tennis shoes. I grabbed the pitchfork I had decided to use for my weapon, then I slipped out the door into the moonlit farmyard.

It was quiet, and the flat, arid landscape looked like the surface of the moon. Everything seemed brightly lit and intensely real, as if I were seeing it in a dream. My senses were all finely tuned, and I could smell the metallic aroma of blood on the cool breeze. I walked slowly toward the chicken coop. I spotted the culprit when I was forty feet away. To my surprise, it wasn't the kind of predatory animal I'd been expecting.

A two-legged creature sat crouched by the main entrance to the henhouse. As I peered closer, I could see that he was biting a chicken in the neck, like some drunk geek in a carnival. I thought I was perhaps dealing with a transient, someone even more pathetic than myself. I was prepared to be lenient, if he would just go away, but I was grateful for the hefty pitchfork in my hand, because nobody quarrels with a man holding a pitchfork.

As I approached, the chicken thief lifted his head and sniffed the breeze, then rose to his full height of about five feet and stepped into the moonlight.

It wasn't a man at all, unless a man has dragon-like wings and spiny appendages across his back. Its torso was wiry and hunched, and it had a reptilian face, which made me shudder. It was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

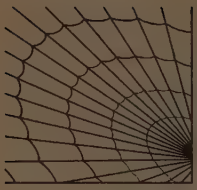
The creature noisily sucked the blood from the chicken's throat, as it gazed directly at me. The creature took a few more slurps from its prey before casually tossing the carcass

aside. I should have run, screaming, but I was frozen with fear.

The creature hopped toward me, fluttering its wings, and I was reminded of the Harpies of Greek mythology. It stared at me with cold, copper eyes, then opened its mouth to reveal a set of long, needle-like fangs daubed with chicken gore.

That was when I screamed!

CHAPTER 6



Peter Parker swiftly turned the page to continue reading Curt Connors' journal. With all of his attention focused on the tattered notebook, he didn't notice Mary Jane entering the living room.

"More coffee, Peter?" she asked.

"Huh? Sure," he responded. "How's Martha doing?"

"Went right to sleep the moment her head touched the pillow," said MJ. She shook her head. "Poor woman. Is there anything you can do for her?"

Peter shrugged. "I don't know, MJ, but I'll try my best to help her and Curt."

Mary Jane smiled and nodded. "I know you will." She leaned down to kiss Peter. "I'll leave you to your book."

As Mary Jane headed back up the stairs, Peter turned back to the journal.

That creature Curt confronted sounds like the same kind I fought in Edna Ferlingham's apartment, he thought. *But what about Miranda Silva? How does* she *figure into this?*

Eagerly, Peter continued to read the handwritten scrawl of Curt's journal:

In this small border town, I came face-to-face with a winged, reptilian harpy that should have only existed in myth, yet there it was! I tried to back away as it advanced on me, but I couldn't get my legs to move.

Suddenly, I felt pangs of pain in my right arm, the one that wasn't there; I felt the skin prickle on my left hand. Shuddering, I looked down at my hand—only to see it growing long claws and scaly green skin!

I gripped the medicine bag around my neck, and that one simple act seemed to focus what I had to do. No matter what happened in the next few seconds, I had to remain human. Had to fight the transformation and keep from turning into a savage beast.

With a hiss, the creature snarled and dropped to its haunches. I thought it would leap for my neck, so I hefted my pitchfork, ready to fight.

A shotgun blast shattered the peaceful night, and I dove to the ground, the old combat training taking over.

I looked up just in time to see the fantastic monster flap its wings and sail into the sky. Despite its horrid appearance, it was extremely graceful in flight. Pumping its wings, it attained high altitude and swerved away from the half-moon, so as not to present a target. A second shotgun blast came nowhere near it.

"Blasted *chupacabras*!" shouted a familiar voice. "I told you to stay off my property!"

I turned to see Armando, shaking his gun at the dark sky. His teenage son, Ernesto, stood beside him, wielding his own shotgun, but he looked reluctant to fire. Whatever we had seen, it had disappeared in the ebony sky.

Quickly I glanced at my hand and was relieved to see that my skin had returned to normal. The transformation had stopped before it had gone too far. I gripped my medicine bag, not ready to eat any of its unsavory contents, but thankful that I had it as a talisman, a reminder.

I stood up and brushed the dirt off my pants. "What did you call that thing? A *chupacabra*?"

I had heard the term before, but I couldn't remember in what context.

"You will only laugh," muttered Armando.

"After what I've just seen?" I responded. "I doubt it." I pointed to the coop. "It killed a chicken."

"Only one? We are lucky. That cursed demon!"

"Come, Papa," said Ernesto, trying to drag his father back into the house.

"Please, tell me!" I insisted. "What *is* it?"

"*Chupacabras*. The goat-sucker. The *gringos* think it's a superstition—a joke. But they aren't here to see the damage the *chupacabras* do to our livestock. You saw it—did you think it was funny?"

"Papa!" said his son, more insistently.

"No, it scared the hell out of me," I answered. "Do you see these things often?"

"Too much!" barked Armando.

"We see them once a month or so," answered Ernesto. "Don't make a big deal of it, please, mister."

"Where do they come from?" I asked.

"Who can say? Hell, outer space, Aztec pyramids, a CIA laboratory—everyone has a theory." Armando walked wearily to the fence and gazed into the chicken coop. "I only see one dead chicken. Somebody get it out, or the others won't lay."

"I'll get it," I said. I stuck the pitchfork in the dirt and shuffled toward the gate. The chicken-wire fence didn't do much good against a creature like the *chupacabra*, which could swoop in from the air. I wanted to see the specific wounds it had made on the chicken. Perhaps I had been wrong to think that it was sucking blood, although its very name suggested that's what it did to its prey.

Now that my head had cleared, I vaguely remembered hearing about the *chupacabra*, hearing it described as a sort of Latin American Bigfoot. In other words, it was considered a localized myth, possibly a hoax. But the creature I had seen was no myth or hoax.

I reached the dead pullet and picked it up. Its throat was nearly split in half by two deep puncture wounds, and its white feathers were drenched with blood. Whatever it was, the *chupacabra* was a messy eater.

"What should I do with it?" I asked.

"Basura," said Armando, pointing toward the garbage bin. "We want nothing to do with it."

After I had disposed of the unfortunate fowl, Armando put his hand on my shoulder. "Come, amigo. After all this excitement, you need a drink."

I wasn't going to argue with him.

We sat up about half an hour, sipping some tequila. Armando told me tales of the *chupacabras*, while his family looked on with embarrassment. I don't know why they should have been embarrassed, because I had seen the creature with my own eyes. Maybe others would scoff at them, but not me, not after the things I had experienced in my own life.

According to Armando, goats and chickens were their primary prey, although the *chupacabras* were known to attack cattle and even humans when desperate, or in packs. They might appear any time of the year, although more frequently in the spring. Nobody could remember when the sightings first started—the *chupacabras* had always been a fixture of the area, even if the media had just picked up on them. *Chupacabras* were only seen in rural areas, never in the city, which made them seem like a joke to city dwellers.

"If you file a complaint about them," added Ernesto, "the *policia* tell you they are only wild dogs."

This remark touched off a mini-debate within the family, in which the Spanish flew so rapidly that I couldn't keep up with most of it. Although a dog might steal chickens and make similar wounds, what I had seen in the moonlight was no dog.

"They can turn themselves into humans," said Armando with a certainty brought on by the tequila.

I blinked in amazement at him. Could that monstrous thing really change into a human? If so, was it human or monster?

"Have you ever seen them change into humans?" I asked hoarsely.

He shook his head. "No, but my *tio* Pepe did. He lived in the Sonoran Desert, near Nogales. He said a *chupacabra* once attacked his burro. And when they trapped the *chupacabra* in a barn, it turned into a beautiful woman and charmed its way out."

Pilar rolled her eyes. "Come on, husband, it's time for bed."

The farmer nodded wearily. "I suppose it is."

"Armando," I asked. "Are you going to the city tomorrow?"

"Yes, I'm making a run to Brownsville."

"Can you drop me off at a library?"

He stared at me and shook his head. "Is that why you have come here? To find the *chupacabras*?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "It seems to have found me first."

"Hunting the *chupacabras* will drive you *loco*," warned Armando, shuffling off to bed. "That's what it did to Tio Pepe. Made him crazy like a cockroach."

I said goodnight to Armando's family and rushed back to my humble shed to put these words down in my journal. The writing has calmed me down, and now that my initial excitement has passed, I begin to wonder how could such an incredible creature escape the scrutiny of science for so long.

The only answer is a condemnation of science. We simply don't place much credence in the words of poor *campesinos* living in the middle of nowhere. Restricting themselves to remote, Spanish-speaking areas, the *chupacabras* have kept themselves the stuff of legend, not textbooks. But that was no legend I saw out there. *Something* spooked the henhouse and slurped the blood from that chicken.

Just to make certain that I wasn't dreaming, I've gone back to the chicken coop to check for tracks. Checking dried

ground littered with straw and corn, I've found nothing conclusive. All is quiet in the farmyard, with a cool southern breeze drifting from the river across the plains. The stars float in the sky like glitter in a pool of black candle wax, and I'm reminded of the woman in the orchard.

Why do I feel a flicker of hope after that strange encounter tonight? Why do I feel as if I was destined to meet that *chupacabra*—a reptile-like creature that possibly has the ability to turn into a human? I always thought I had drifted down here for no reason, but now I'm not so certain.

For the first time in years, I look forward to tomorrow.

Day 8

I shaved, trying to make myself as neat as possible for my trip to the library. I don't think I'll ever get used to shaving with my left hand, no matter how many times I do it. Martha used to shave me, and when I do it myself, it only reminds me of her. I must shed that skin, become something new.

I could do it easily, except for Martha and William. Memories of them keep hauling me back to the place I left. I must get them out of my mind in order to concentrate on my research. I have no choice. I must learn more about that creature.

I'm writing this as Armando is gassing the pick-up truck to head to Brownsville. There're no gas stations in the village, so everybody keeps a 50-gallon drum full of gas in their yard, which I assume is illegal. These people are so self-sufficient, I admire them, especially how they live on their own terms, not wanting more than they need. I haven't crossed the border yet, but I know I'll need to go deep into Mexico. It's like something is calling me.

We're ready to go. I'm riding in the bed of the truck, so no more writing until I reach the library.

• • •

Situated at the tip of Texas, Brownsville is an in-between place, a First World resort perched on the edge of the Third World. The golf courses and sea breezes distract one from the slums and the factories. Because Brownsville has so many out-of-town tourists and part-time residents, they have wonderful libraries. I'm in one of them now. It has a computerized card catalogue, PCs hooked up to the internet, microfiche viewers with several Texas and Mexican newspapers on file, copy machines, and lots of books and periodicals. The librarians are friendly and knowledgeable, and they've heard of *chupacabras*.

I think I would miss libraries like this if I were living in the wilderness full time. Is that really what I want to do? Maybe my research will lead me in the right direction.

If these notes aren't in a logical order, please forgive me. I'm dredging up more information on *chupacabras* than I ever dreamed existed, and I haven't got the time to organize it properly. *Chupacabras* have been reported in every Spanish-speaking locale from Puerto Rico to San Diego, and throughout Central America. Although there have been sightings in Texas, Arizona, and Florida, they pale when compared with the number of reported sightings in Mexico.

Extremely rural areas are the favorite haunt of the *chupacabras*, and small domesticated animals are their favorite prey. They have been known to massacre large numbers of animals in a single attack: 150 turkeys, rabbits, goats, cats, and dogs in Puerto Rico; 69 goats, chickens, geese and ducks in Sweetwater, Florida; 28 rams in Chiapas, Mexico.

After reading a number of accounts, I can say there's a great difference in the way that *chupacabras* are reported in the Spanish-language press as opposed to the English-language press. In Latin America, encounters are treated

in a factual and newsworthy fashion, with interviews with witnesses and scientific experts who have examined the evidence.

Puncture wounds are a constant factor in *chupacabra* attacks. One veterinarian from Mexico City described how puncture wounds in the neck of a goat resulted in its brain being partially evacuated from its cranial cavity. I should have looked more closely at that chicken when I had the chance.

Stories in Mexican newspapers often focus on the economic hardships suffered by *campesinos* who have their livestock decimated by these reptilian vampires. For these people, losing a few goats and chickens is a financial disaster. From reading these reports, one would accept the existence of the *chupacabras* without equivocation.

In the United States, the *chupacabras* are treated with disdain. In border states, vendors sell caricatures of the beast on T-shirts, hats, ash trays, and other souvenir items. There are Mexican restaurants and drinks named after the *chupacabras*, plus a growing number of goatsucker jokes. In large Mexican cities, the *chupacabras* are the butt of similar jokes, so this may be more a class distinction than a language problem.

On the computer, I've found a usenet newsgroup that's devoted to the *chupacabras*, but it's mostly the repository of numerous far-fetched theories. Armando was right—there's no shortage of explanations for these strange creatures. The two most popular theories are that *chupacabras* are space aliens, or they're the product of a CIA Black Budget experiment. One correspondent claims that *chupacabras* are really giant clumps of killer bees.

It's time to break for lunch. I've got information overload from sifting through all this dreck; I don't even know what I'm

looking for anymore. If I want to journey into Mexico, I might as well keep looking for this elusive beast, but where do I start? Mexico is a huge country.

Coming back from lunch, I altered my search criteria and netted information about real goatsuckers, which are found in zoos all over the world. Goatsuckers are a family of nocturnal birds—soft-feathered with long, pointed wings; short, weak legs and feet; a very small bill, but a wide, gaping mouth. Their eyes reflect light at night, which may have accounted for the fear they inspired among our ancestors. These feathered goatsuckers feed almost exclusively on insects and are found in the Mediterranean, in places where goats graze.

I must keep looking, but farther afield.

At last, I've discovered something truly useful! In a magazine devoted to UFO sightings, I found a list of all the *chupacabra* attacks and sightings in Mexico. It's exhaustive. I'm going to triangulate the information on photocopies of maps of Mexico, to see if I can pinpoint the area of the greatest *chupacabras* concentration. Maybe this exercise won't result in anything, but I feel as if I'm on the right track.

I've been working all afternoon, and I'm glad that Armando is running later than he said he would. After triangulating my data on *chupacabra* activity, I've plotted the area on my maps where they might possibly live in the greatest numbers. It's in a remote part of north-central Mexico called Valle del Lagarto.

The Valley of the Lizard.

The valley lies deep in the Sierra Madre mountain range in the state of Chihuahua, a hundred miles from anywhere. The closest settlement is an old silver mining town called

Acotapilas. By all reports, the region is nothing but twisting rivers, rugged mountains, and bottomless canyons, so deep there are seven different vegetation zones on the way down—alpine, uplands, plains, plateau, basin, middle canyon, and desert at the bottom. Several of the canyons are twice as large and twice as deep as the Grand Canyon.

Only a handful of Indians related to the Tarahumara tribe live near the valley. If I wanted to go someplace remote and far from civilization, I couldn't have picked a better locale. Now I have to ask myself: Do I have the courage to really go there?

The library is closing, and I just have time to return my materials and gather up my papers. I'm apprehensive about the future, but I'm also oddly exhilarated over what I've discovered. I may be chasing phantoms or myths, but at least I'm chasing *something*.

At least I have a purpose.

Peter Parker marked his place in the journal and set it on the coffee table. He didn't feel exhilarated about what he was learning—more like apprehensive. He had a feeling that Curt's book did not have a happy ending.

Peter rose stiffly from the couch and walked into the kitchen to get more coffee. According to the cat-shaped clock on the wall, it was 2:00 A.M. Fortunately, Peter was used to late nights, and it was a lot easier for his battered and bruised body to spend the night on the couch than on the ledge of a skyscraper.

Returning to the couch, Peter picked up Curt's journal and commenced reading where he had left off.

Day 11

Two days ago, I talked to Armando and his family about my desire to go into Mexico. I asked them what was the best way to cross the border.

Armando laughed. "Why are you worried? You're a gringo. You can go back and forth across the border all day long, no problem. My people can't do that. Even if we're legal, it's always a hassle—open the trunk, call the dogs to sniff."

When he calmed down, he asked, "Where do you want to go in Mexico?"

"Chihuahua," I answered. "Valle del Lagarto, a place high in the Sierra Madres."

His eyes widened. "That's a long way, over very rough country. You could walk across the border at Laredo or Reynoso, and try to take a bus or train from there. Or hitchhike." He frowned at that thought and added, "If you want to earn a few dollars to get you started, maybe you could stay here another few days."

"Thank you," I said gratefully.

His wife, Pilar, hadn't said much during my stay, although her faint smile revealed that she had accepted me. Now she pointed to the medicine bag around my neck and asked, "Has that worked for you?"

"I . . ." I answered hesitantly, clutching the snake skin encased in leather. "I guess it has."

Pilar nodded. "Then your visit has been worth the long journey."

"Oh, yes," I answered. "Definitely."

She nodded, looking pleased. Still, I think she was a bit relieved that I was moving on.

So I've been working for Armando and getting paid for the first time. My chores haven't changed much—it's still tending the animals, cleaning the barn, and collecting eggs. But I did go into the fields yesterday to run the gas-powered conveyor belt for a while. I've been working longer hours, but

I don't mind it. This may be the last camaraderie I'll have for a long time, as there aren't many people where I'm going.

Day 13

This is my last night in Punta Roja, which is nothing more than a jut of land on the Rio Grande, but the understated support of these people has given me the confidence to go on. I feel as if all of them know my story, when I haven't told them anything. It's a testament to their decency that they don't pry, even while they're trying to help me. Saying goodbye to Armando and his family will be difficult, but I've gotten very adept at farewells.

I hitchhiked to a pay phone and made some phone calls on 800 numbers to travel agents. I'm not one to strike out blindly into the wilderness; I always do my homework. As far as I can tell, there aren't any roads or regular means of public transportation where I'm going, but there's a railroad that passes through a few of the old mine towns. It's either that, or get a four-wheel-drive vehicle and hope for a lot of luck. I don't have nearly enough money for a four-wheel drive, and my luck has been off lately. With the money Armando has paid me, I might be able to afford a Mexican rail ticket.

I've got to get to Chihuahua first, and that means crossing miles of Texas and miles of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, and Coahuila, three other Mexican states. Armando has come through for me again, and he's gotten me a ride on a grapefruit truck to Reynoso. From there, I'll be on my own in getting across Mexico.

I walked out to the chicken coop just a little while ago and gazed up into the star-scrambled sky. I found myself looking for the mysterious winged creature, while I gripped my med-

icine bag protectively. Am I acting like a fool? I don't think so. What I saw was real, and the fact that I was here to see it may have been a blessing. I haven't gotten many breaks lately, and I can't help but to feel that I was here, at this time, for a reason.

I know my expedition into Mexico is dangerous and foolhardy, but it's not as if I have an awful lot to lose. I'm too unstable to live with my family, and they were the only ones who kept me clinging to the semblance of a normal life. Perhaps, if I find the chupacabras, they'll be able to help me with my condition. Cure me . . . or kill me.

It doesn't really matter. At this point, either solution is acceptable.

Peter sighed and put down the journal. It seemed like an intrusion into a good man's personal anguish to keep reading; if he hadn't needed the information, he would have stopped. Curt Connors had always been a private man, suffering stoically, and it was deeply affecting to see him pour out his soul in these tattered pages.

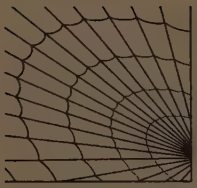
Besides, Peter felt considerable guilt over his failure to help Connors, after Curt had helped Spider-Man so many times. They had often come so close to perfecting an antidote that would cure Connors of his deadly alter-ego, but each time it was just an illusion, a temporary respite.

Maybe there would never be a cure for Curt Connors. Maybe he was doomed to share his existence with a savage, crazed beast whose every thought was focused on wiping out all of humanity. Maybe the day would come when Curt Connors ceased to exist at all—a day when there would be nothing left but a hate-filled monster.

To what lengths would Spider-Man go to stop it then?

Peter shuddered and tried to push the thought away.

CHAPTER 7



Despite his qualms about reading something so personal, Peter picked up Curt Connors' journal and flipped it open again. He had to get to the bottom of this mysterious tale.

Day 14

At dawn this morning, I said goodbye to my wonderful hosts and boarded the back of a flat-bed truck with wooden sides and no shock absorbers for the ride to Reynoso. There were only twenty bushels of grapefruit in the truck, and they were mostly there to camouflage the other ten passengers and myself. This was really an illegal shuttle service. We huddled together for warmth in the chill of the early morning, and the potholes and dirt roads took an awful toll on my tailbone. We were all glad when we reached the highway and had a smoother ride, despite the dust and fumes.

I was able to make small-talk with my fellow passengers, all of whom were farm workers headed to greener pastures. Before this journey, I couldn't imagine living their kind of nomadic life, hardly owning more than the clothes on their backs, traipsing from town to town for a few days of work in the fields. But these were not despondent men and women; they were relaxed, contented people. Despite what appeared to be a hard life, they faced it with dignity and humor.

At least they didn't have to face losing their job and their research grants, being considered crazy and unreliable. At least bill collectors weren't hounding them while they spent every waking moment just trying to keep their sanity, trying to hold their families together. Considering the hardships I've suffered in our so-called civilized world, this humble world looked pretty appealing.

Maybe we were never intended to put down roots and go

to the same job, the same house, and do the same things over and over again, every single day. Maybe we were meant to keep moving, keep shedding our skin.

After the grueling trip ended, I had to brush the dirt off my clothes, comb my hair, and assume another persona—that of the prosperous tourist. To stop the flow of stolen cars into Mexico, tourists have to post a bond for their cars or leave a credit card, in addition to buying insurance. But the worst part of driving into Mexico is waiting in a long line of cars to come back. Due to these hassles, many tourists going to Mexico for the day simply park their cars on the U.S. side and walk across the border.

So I strode into Mexico with the rest of the tourists, eliciting hardly a glance from Mexican custom officials. I had I.D., and I could have shown it, but one of those travel agents told me that a passport is required for a stay greater than three months. And I may never come back. It's better to enter this way, without leaving any trace.

I rushed through the unavoidable border/shopping zone, full of tiny *tiendas* selling onyx carvings, prescription drugs, perfumes, native clothing, and leather goods. The only things I bought were a cheap straw hat, a map, and a canteen, which I filled with the local water. By all rights, I should get dysentery at some point, probably two or three days from now, but I might as well get my system used to the local bacteria. One good thing about my condition is that I'm seldom sick anymore. I might not have any problem at all.

As I walked through town, I noticed a town square with a statue of Zapata, where half-a-dozen beat-up vans were parked. There were signs advertising shuttles to different cities. I knew that the nearest big city is Monterrey, which was on my way east, but I didn't want to start spending money on transportation yet. I wasn't sure about the advis-

ability of hitchhiking these unfamilar roads either. There had to be another way to get deeper into this immense country.

So I backtracked and went to a bar, El Papagayo, which I had been told is frequented by Americans. There weren't many patrons when I first entered the place, but that was still early in the afternoon. I sat by a window overlooking the street and nursed a mineral water, while I watched for tourists, seeing who got out of a car, van, or truck.

For once, luck was with me. I saw an RV pull up and park on the street. It was the kind in which the camper was attached to a pick-up truck. An older couple wearing golf clothes got out, and they did a little window-shopping before meandering toward the bar. I tucked my medicine bag under my shirt and smiled pleasantly at them as they entered. They smiled back, even sitting near me.

I got out my map and began studying it, hoping that would break the ice. I tried to look sufficiently puzzled.

"Where are you headed?" the gentleman asked me pleasantly.

"To Chihuahua," I answered. "I want to check out Copper Canyon." That wasn't really my destination, but it was the best-known canyon in the Sierra Madres. I doubted if they had ever heard of Valle del Lagarto.

"I hear Copper Canyon is beautiful," said the woman. "We thought about going there."

I picked up my drink. "Mind if I join you?"

"No, go right ahead." The man even pulled over a chair for me.

"Curt Wilson," I lied, holding out my left hand.

"Jack McCurdy," he answered, giving me a firm handshake. "This is my wife, Edna."

"Pleased to meet you," I said, taking a seat. "I understand that the train ride through Copper Canyon is absolutely

breathtaking. It's about twice as big as the Grand Canyon, you know."

"Maybe we ought to think about going there," Edna told her husband.

"What's your itinerary?" I asked in what I hoped was a neutral tone of voice.

Jack smiled and brushed back the few strands of white hair that remained on the top of his head. "We haven't really got one—we're foot-loose and fancy-free!"

"So am I."

He pointed to my arm. "Are you collecting disability?"

I nodded, hoping that Martha was still getting my disability checks, meagre as they were. "War wound."

"Oh, what branch?" he asked with interest.

"Army." We proceeded to compare service histories in that familiar way in which vets bond with one another. I left out the fact that I had been a doctor.

"And you're traveling alone?" asked Edna, as if that was a sad state of affairs.

I shrugged. "It's better than sitting at home, watching TV."

"Where are you from?"

"Florida."

"So are we!" Edna patted her blond-gray hair, and we all beamed happily at one another.

If we had run into each other on the streets of Miami, we wouldn't have dared to speak to each other. But here we were like old friends, due to the simple fact that we lived in the same state with thirteen million other people. For a few minutes, we tested each others' knowledge of Florida geography just to make sure we really were Floridians. Of course, the McCurdys were transplants from Ohio and had retired to the Sunshine State.

"How are you getting around?" Edna finally asked. "Do you have a car?"

I motioned to my empty sleeve. "It's a little hard to drive. I'll find some way to get to those canyons, because I'm determined. I saw some shuttle vans in the square."

"They didn't look very dependable," said Jack doubtfully.

"Beggars can't be choosers," I replied. "Would you excuse me for a moment?"

I got up and walked away from the table, thinking that I couldn't lay it out any clearer than that. I needed transportation, and they had it. They needed a destination, and I had one. The rest of it was up to Edna and Jack.

I stayed in the restroom much longer than I needed to, in order to give them time to talk. I wasn't particularly proud of this manipulation of two complete strangers, and I hoped I wasn't putting them in danger. But I was determined to get to Valle del Lagarto.

When I returned to the table, looking somewhat tired and dejected, they were both beaming at me. I knew I was in.

"Sit down, Curt," said Jack. "We have a proposition for you. The idea of seeing Copper Canyon really appeals to Edna, and we wondered if you wanted to hitch along with us. We don't go real fast, but we're like a turtle—we carry our own shell."

He sighed. "Frankly, there aren't that many campgrounds once you get away from the beaches and the cities, and they're not much different from Florida. That's not why we came here—we want to see the the countryside, the *real* Mexico. You can legally camp just about anywhere along the road, but it's a little scary out there. I wouldn't mind having another man around, especially to keep watch at night. There are still some *banditos* in these hills."

"I'm a light sleeper," I assured them.

"Good," said Jack. "Now let me see that map."

And that's how I came to be hooked up with Edna and Jack McCurdy. They didn't tell me until I got to their RV that there was one other member of their party: Archie, a mean little dog. This bug-eyed mutt yapped at me constantly from the first moment it laid eyes on me, acting as if it knew all of my secrets.

Edna appeared momentarily distressed over Archie's rejection of me, but Jack laughed it off. "He's old and cantankerous, like us. He sleeps in a crate in the back, so don't worry about him. Come here, Archie."

Jack shooed the dog back into the RV and locked him away, and I was glad that I got to ride in the cab of the truck with the McCurdys. From that moment on, Jack took over navigation, and I'm not sure exactly what route we took. I know we camped the first night in a AAA-approved campsite on the outskirts of Monterrey. Jack told us this would probably be the last time we'd have the amenities of a commercial campground for a while. I seized the day, taking a hot shower and washing my clothes.

Things have been fine, except for Archie's aversion to me. Edna and Jack have plenty of canned food plus a stocked refrigerator, and they're happy to share. Tonight we had baked beans and hot dogs. I noticed that Archie covets table scraps but doesn't get any, so I may sneak him some to get on his good side.

I'm sitting outside now, watching the city lights behind me and the dark mountains in front of me. I've caught sight of a few bats skimming over the lighted swimming pool. I'm going to sleep in the cab of the truck, which is fine with me. After all, I'm a stranger, and this gives my hosts a chance to lock me out of the RV. Once again, I understand that my main job is to be on watch, and it's a job I take very seriously.

Tomorrow we have a long drive, about 500 miles. That would be a day's drive in most of the U.S., but I don't know anything about these roads.

Day 16

We've crossed mountain, plains, deserts, forests, rivers, and two Mexican states, and we've just now gotten to the highlands of Chihuahua. The grassy plains have given way to a pine-covered forest, and this is the most beautiful, unspoiled area I've yet seen in Mexico. It reminds me of the pine forests of Georgia. Except for a few scattered farms—or ruins, it's hard to tell as we speed past—it appears as if no one lives here. The magnificent Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains loom before us, and they are unexpectedly green and lush.

It's getting dark, the winding, two-lane road needs repair, and we're seventy miles from the nearest town. Jack has decided to pull off the road and camp among the pines for the night. It's ham-and-cheese sandwiches and canned corn for dinner, and nobody can say that Edna and Jack haven't taken good care of me. They might have stopped at various missions and museums in the towns we passed along the way, but they sensed my urgency to keep going.

I sure hope they catch their train, as intended, and have themselves a wonderful tour of Copper Canyon. They deserve it for their kindness.

Tonight I will earn my keep by pulling guard duty in the cab of the truck again. I'll have the keys, and I don't plan to sleep very much. At the first sign of trouble, my orders are to drive off and explain my actions later.

We don't seem to have any weapons, except for a few kitchen knives and a hand axe. But Jack has purchased a lot of firecrackers while he's been in Mexico, and I'm armed

with a lighter and several strings of Black Cats. If William were here, he'd be trying to talk me into setting off a few of these, but I have no wish to disturb the profound silence of this forest.

Jack has just caught me writing in this journal, and he asked me, "Are you a writer?"

"Not usually, but this trip I am." I neglected to mention the grant applications, books, and papers on herpetology I've written. That seems like another life, so long ago. In all that writing and research, I've never written a simple journal like this one. I never put my feelings on paper, except when I wrote Martha letters during the war. It feels good.

I'm sitting in the cab of the RV, writing by flashlight and watching the stars. Never in my entire life have I seen so many stars, and I keep thinking of the glitter sprinkled on the dark wax in the *curandera*'s cabin. The sky has that kind of unreal depth—endless blackness with sweeping patterns of pinpoint light. I can see pictures and meteorites in the sky; it's almost like looking at clouds. I took the snakeskin from my medicine bag and studied it by flashlight, and I found that it had glitter sprinkled all over it.

Even the sound of my pen on this paper is an affront to the utter silence which surrounds us. Why does no one live in this paradise? I'll ponder this thought as I watch the stars.

Day 17

Since my last entry, I've been abandoned and nearly killed. And I'm spending a freezing night in the cab of a small bulldozer. Although my hand is shaking, I think I can write down what happened.

I was huddled in a blanket on the bench seat of the RV, dozing a bit. The pine trees surrounded us like a fortress, and there was nothing to worry about. Behind me in the

camper, all was quiet and peaceful, until that bug-eyed dog started barking.

He woke me up, as he did the McCurdys, but they had considerably more sympathy for him than I did. I saw a light go on in the camper, and I heard the door creak open.

Archie charged out and began yapping at the trees. I cast off my blanket, grabbed my flashlight, and stepped out of the cab. I was fully dressed, including shoes, because I was ready to react to any emergency, including the dog freaking out. I couldn't see anything in the gently swaying boughs, and after a few moments Archie quieted down and slipped off to do his business under a towering conifer.

I waved to Jack, who was standing in the doorway of the camper, while Archie ignored us both and sniffed around the tree trunks. It wasn't freezing outside, but it was cold at this hour and I could see my breath.

"Sorry to wake you," said Jack. "Archie needed to get out."

"I understand." After I slipped Archie a hot dog this morning, he had stopped yapping at me, although he still gave me a fishy look every so often. I could see that Jack was cold, and he was only wearing a bathrobe.

"You go back to bed, and I'll watch him," I said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I could use a breath of fresh air, too. I'll knock to let him back in."

"Thanks." Jack disappeared back into his turtle shell.

I wandered a bit closer to Archie, stamping my feet to ward off the cold. The dog yapped at something in the distance and dashed off.

Now I had to chase the mutt, because I didn't want to lose track of him. I trained my flashlight beam on the silent evergreens as my feet crunched softly over the accumulated bed

of needles. The idiot dog was still running, as if he was chasing something through the trees. Suddenly I began to hear fluttering noises, which I assumed were made by birds startled by Archie's rudeness.

The mutt took up the yapping in earnest, like the first time he had met me. I jogged through the towering evergreens, getting more worried by the second, because I didn't know who was out here. There could be jaguars, Indians, *banditos*, who knows what!

"Archie!" I grumbled. "Stop it!"

The yapping turned into a strangled yowl, and my heart leaped in my throat. I stopped, and all was quiet, except for a flapping sound in the trees. Wracked with fear and a strange exhilaration, I started toward the ominous noises.

When my flashlight beam hit them, the *chupacabras* scattered like shadows in a darkened room when the curtain is thrown open. I held my breath. One of the lithe, winged creatures remained for an instant, just long enough to toss Archie's bloody corpse onto the pine needles.

"Who-who are you?" I rasped.

The creature leaped into the darkness and took flight. I tried to follow it with my flashlight, but the trees blocked the beam. It disappeared as I heard footsteps clomping behind me.

"Curt!" called Jack.

"Archie!" shrieked Edna.

They were undoubtedly drawn by my flashlight, and I considered turning it off so they wouldn't find me . . . and Archie. But that would be the coward's way out. I looked up at the window of stars visible through the trees, and I knew that the chupacabras were gone and would not return tonight.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Jack, staggering into the circle of my light, puffing and wheezing.

I pointed the light at the remains of Archie. "A wild animal got him."

"Oh, no!" shrieked Edna. She ran past me, took one glance, and flew at me like a harpy. "I knew you were no good! I knew Archie hated you, and you were going to get him!"

I held up my empty hand. "I didn't do anything to Archie, I swear."

"I leave you alone with him for *two seconds*—" she sobbed, pulling a snub-nosed revolver from her robe pocket.

"Whoa!" I shouted, ducking behind a tree trunk. Now I did turn off my flashlight.

She shot wildly, twice, but it sounded like a barrage of bullets in that somber forest.

"Edna, get a grip on yourself!" barked Jack. I peered out from behind a tree trunk to see him wrestling the gun away from his wife. I winced in fear, expecting to see another killing—but no more shots were fired. Edna dropped to the ground, sobbing, and Jack stuck the gun in his belt.

"I'm sorry, Curt," he said hoarsely. "It's okay to come out."

Cautiously I did so, and I saw Jack bending over his wife, trying to comfort her. She kept sobbing inconsolably, so he turned his attention to Archie's bloody carcass.

"Curt, shine that light over here," he grumbled.

I did as I was ordered, and the two of us knelt down beside the remains of poor Archie. I clearly saw the puncture wounds in the dog's neck, which I expected to find, but I'm not sure what Jack saw—he was too busy fighting back tears.

"We had that dog for a long time," he said haltingly.

"I'm sorry, Jack." I was still too shaken from dodging bullets to say much more than that.

"Did you see what got him?"

"No," I lied. "He took off like a shot, chasing after something, and I tried to follow him. I heard some noises, and I ran toward them. I guess I scared them off, but it was too late for Archie."

"He was never afraid of anything," said Jack with admiration.

"He's a liar!" screamed Edna, pointing at me. "He knows exactly what happened to little Archie. I'm not getting back into that vehicle with him."

"Edna, you're being unreasonable," said Jack. "I picked this place to camp, and I let Archie out. It's my fault, if it's anyone's. And we can't abandon a man way out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Sure we can—that's where we found him."

My heart and my mind were racing, and I considered irrational actions, such as overpowering Jack and taking the gun from him. Edna's hostility was making me feel woozy, and I had to diffuse the situation.

"Leave me here," I said, "if it makes you feel better."

"Are you serious?" asked Jack.

"Yes, let's leave him," said Edna, jumping to her feet.

"I need my backpack and my things," I insisted.

"We don't want your stuff," sniffed Edna. She turned and stalked back toward camp.

"Honey!" called Jack. "Do you want to bury Archie?"

"No, we'll take him with us," said Edna. "I don't want some wild animal digging him up after we've gone."

Five minutes later, Edna and Jack climbed into their RV, started it up, and lumbered back onto the dark highway. Their headlights soon disappeared around a bend in the road and all trace of them was gone.

I was abandoned by the side of the road, a road upon

which we hadn't seen any traffic for several hours.

I had been angry, almost dangerously so, but now I'm glad they're gone. Edna and Jack got me across the longest leg of my journey, for which I am grateful. Considering the potential danger they were in traveling with me, it worked out for the best.

While I strolled along that lonely two-lane blacktop, I scanned the starscape, looking for the fantastic winged creatures. I had seen them twice now; I knew what they were, even what they ate. How far could they fly in a single night? Did they live all over Mexico, did they migrate places, or did they just have an extremely large hunting range?

Half of me wanted to announce their discovery to the world. Half of me wanted to keep them a secret, my secret. Of course, they weren't a secret at all—they were an accepted fact of life in this part of the world. Even though *chupacabras* were real and I could produce hundreds of witnesses, if I talked about them in my former circles, I'd be laughed off the campus. The creatures' own legend now protects them.

As the night wore on, I kept walking uphill, and the air kept getting colder. I was glad to spot this bulldozer resting by the side of the road, and I climbed in and made myself at home. There are plastic flaps I can shut to keep out some of the chill. I don't know what tomorrow will bring, but I can tell you that I'm both frightened and encouraged. Despite the dangers, this is where I wanted to be—in the wilderness, freed from science and civilization.

But I'm not alone.

Day 18

At dawn I emerged, creaking and shivering, from my steel cave, ready for the day's adventure. All I knew was that the

general direction of my travel matched the general direction of this road, so I started walking.

I was lucky. No sooner had the sun peeped over the mountains than a late-model Jeep came rumbling down the road. I stuck my thumb out and flashed my most amiable smile. I was surprised when they pulled over.

I was prepared for almost anything out here, but not the two guys who were in this Jeep. They looked and acted like rich Mexican college kids, out on a lark, and they were wearing genuine Polo shirts. Their English was excellent, and once they found out I was an American, they insisted on speaking English. I was miffed because I didn't get a chance to practice my Spanish, but they were doing me the favor.

When I told them—their names were Miguel and Antonio—my story about wanting to reach the train which led deeper into the canyons, they were enthusiastic about helping me. They had been to Copper Canyon, and they told me about it in such detail that I felt as if I had been there, too. I was tired from my eventful night, and I don't remember what lies I told them about myself. One true story I stuck to was how I had lost my arm in the war. Sooner or later, everyone wants to know about that, and the truth is easier to remember.

My hosts told me they were going out of their way in order to deliver me to a train station. Once again, I had no need to look at a map or pay attention to our route, so I didn't. I had placed myself in the hands of fate and the kindness of strangers, which was very much unlike me. I was usually a control freak, an alpha male, but I was becoming a passive fatalist on this journey.

Miguel and Antonio never did tell me where they were headed, and I didn't pry.

As we journeyed higher into the Sierra Madres, the ter-

rain around us became more rugged and mountainous. On the bluffs which rose on either side of the road, we occasionally caught glimpses of Indians, all wearing brightly colored fabrics. Antonio and Miguel told me that they are nomads and cave dwellers, which explains the lack of houses. Of course, whole palaces could be hidden in those canyons, and one would never know.

We forded two shallow streams and crossed a creaky one-lane wooden bridge over a roaring gorge of water. Spectacular waterfalls cascaded from green cliffs above our heads into rocky pools below the road. My hosts assured me these waterfalls were nothing compared to the sights deeper in the wonderland of canyons.

Without warning, we climbed atop a plateau and found ourselves in a lush chaparral with strange, misshapen succulents, cacti, and agave. These spiky, alien shapes added a dreamlike quality to our drive, and even Antonio and Miguel were oddly quiet. On the plateau, the countryside was lime green and tan, as opposed to the dark green and gray of the valleys.

We seemed to have drifted back in time a hundred years or so—to the Wild West. We were suddenly sharing the road with cowboys riding mules and burros, pushing small herds of cattle, sheep, and goats. They politely trotted onto the shoulder to let us pass. We saw an old Spanish mission lying in ruins and an abandoned mine, which was littered with the rusted hulks of old equipment. Scattered among the cacti were small houses constructed of rocks and sod; some of them were dug right into the hillsides.

When we finally came to the village, it was a genuine Wild West town with a slight Latin flavor, like the set from an Italian Western. The town was dominated by two buildings, an old Spanish mission with a giant cement cross in front,

and the colonial-style train station. Railroad tracks stretched into the mountains.

The main street was a picturesque mixture of adobe ranch houses and weathered wooden buildings, with hitching posts that were in use by burros and mules. On a scarred hillside sat the hulk of an abandoned silver mine, and it looked disconcertingly like the modern artwork in front of a public building. I squinted into the distance and saw sun-baked ruins on the outskirts of town. Whether they were Spanish or Indian, I couldn't say.

The residents also seemed to have come from a Sergio Leone costuming session. I saw steely-eyed men with scars on their faces, gazing at me from doorways and windows. Coy, dark-haired women in vibrantly colored dresses gathered around an ancient well in the town square. The people didn't shower us with flower leis, but I could tell that tourists were an accepted part of life. I smiled, because the two young Mexicans with me looked more like tourists than I did.

There was a palpable sensation of being on the frontier, beyond the reach of law. My two college chums quickly climbed back into their shiny Jeep.

"End of the road, pardner," said Antonio cheerfully. "Good luck."

"Thanks!" I smiled and waved. For a person who hasn't had much good luck, the smallest kindness could seem like a bonanza.

Looking around, I saw that it literally was the end of the road. From here, there were only railroad tracks and foot paths into the rugged mountains which loomed all around us. The only road out was the one which came in.

I strolled to the railroad station, aware that people were watching me all the way. Once inside the station, I was surprised to find about fifteen people waiting for the train, which

meant that my timing was good. All of these people seemed to be locals—I was the only tourist catching the train here.

When I talked to the ticket clerk, I learned that my timing was perfect. The southbound train was due shortly; the next one didn't come until tomorrow. My choices for accomodations on the train were second class, first class, and the Vista Dome observation car. The old Curt Connors would have gone first-class at least, but I bought a cheap second-class ticket to Acotapilas. The clerk was a little surprised, as I gather that isn't a common tourist destination.

Half-an-hour later, a modern diesel train pulled into the station, and there was a frenzy of activity. After I boarded the crowded train, I instantly regretted that I didn't go first-class. There wasn't anywhere to sit, and I stood shoulder-to-shoulder with dozens of strangers. It was like riding a rush-hour subway in Manhattan, complete with pushy, talkative passengers.

When the train went up a steep grade, I found it hard to hang onto the handrail with only one hand. All of this temporarily spooked me, and I felt myself getting claustrophobic and panicky. Here we were, in a sparsely settled wilderness, packed like cheap cigars in a cardboard box. I didn't want to lose control, so I tried to meditate and regulate my breath.

I realized I could be suffering from altitude sickness, which might be the cause of my anxiety attack. I forced myself to remain calm.

Through the windows I got to see some of the remarkable countryside as we sped along. The canyons were truly magnificent—sheer cliffs, jagged peaks, and gaping crevasses, all covered with leafy firs, cypress, cedars, oaks, and a dozen other trees. In the deepest canyons, I could see the different vegetation zones: alpine, chaparral, and desert at the bottom. Often I caught glimpses of plunging waterfalls

high above us, and churning rivers far below.

Unexpectedly, I glimpsed meadows, fields, and villages nestled among the rugged peaks. The stone homes were so modest that they seem to blend into the cliffsides. Was Valle del Lagarto like this? I wondered. I supposed that it was, only more remote, without even a train passing near it.

Acotapilas was the fifth stop, and I was the only passenger who got off there. I looked at the observation coach, filled with tourists guzzling cocktails, and I felt oddly superior. Then I looked around at the town I had decided to visit days ago. It was to be the last stop before I reached my final destination, my healing ground. And I felt disappointed.

Acotapilas looked like a ghost town. Most of it lay in reddish, overgrown ruins, sparkling cheerfully with hot-pink flowers on lush vines. The inhabited part of the town was nothing but makeshift shacks constructed of wood and corrugated tin. The train station was a log cabin, and even the ubiquitous mission was in crumbling ruins. Despite this unpromising start, I heard laughter floating on the late afternoon breeze, and I followed it to the only *cantina* in town.

Amazingly, there were not only burros parked outside the stone and adobe building, there were also three beat-up vehicles: two ancient four-wheel-drives and an off-road motorcycle.

As I entered the tiny *cantina*, I spotted half-a-dozen scurvy-looking cowboys hanging around. Their conversation ended abruptly even before the door creaked shut behind me. They stared at me as I took a seat at a rough-hewn, homemade table. One wouldn't think that a middle-aged tourist with only one arm would be threatening to anybody, but they acted as if I was an infamous gunslinger. Many of them had pistols on their hips and rifles leaning against their chairs.

These weren't indigenous people, I decided, or even the cowboys I had seen in the previous town. They were probably drug runners, growing their stuff in some nearby canyon.

A pretty barmaid in a brightly colored dress sashayed over to my table, and I ordered a cola. It arrived warm, of course, and the glass had no ice in it, but I wasn't going to quibble. The familiar drink still tasted good, and the caffeine gave me a jolt of confidence.

As long as everyone was going to stare at me, I figured I might as well give them reason. I was finally here in the place where my search was supposed to begin, and I saw no reason to keep my mission a secret. In Spanish, I asked, "Have any of you seen any *chupacabras*?"

That question seemed to confirm their worst fears about me, and they shook their heads and whispered.

"What is that?" grumbled a man with a black beard. One of his *compadres* laughed.

"You know what it is," I answered. The businesslike scientist in me was beginning to reassert himself, and I wouldn't stand for any nonsense. "I've come here to investigate the *chupacabras*. I would appreciate any help you could give me."

"You need to go to Acapulco," said the bearded man. "Or maybe Puerto Vallarta. No *chupacabras*, but nice beaches."

"Wait a minute," said a younger man who was wearing a lacy tuxedo shirt. He sauntered over to my table. "Do you have any money?"

I sighed. "I don't have much money on me, but at home—"

"Bah!" exclaimed the young man. "*Está loco!*"

Despite scattered laughter, I stuck to my agenda. "I need a guide to take me to Valle del Lagarto."

Now I got wide-eyed stares, several mumbled prayers, and even a few crossed chests. The man with the beard fixed me with a baleful gaze.

"Mister, you need to leave here. Now."

Trying to stay calm, I sipped my warm soda before I said, "I can't leave now. I don't have any transportation, and there's not another train today."

"You can walk," said the younger man as if it was a joke.

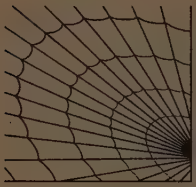
"Point me in the direction of Valle del Lagarto, and I'll walk," I promised. "I'm not leaving this area until I find out about the chupacabras."

After that, I decided to ignore them. I opened my journal, and I've been writing in it ever since. Now I'm writing by candlelight, and it's pitch dark outside. I don't really know what time it is, or what I'm going to do next.

The cowboys have left, all except for two, who seem to have remained specifically to keep an eye on me. I suppose I should ask the barmaid if there's any place in Acotapilas where one might get a cheap bed for the night, but I haven't seen her in quite a while.

I know this could turn out badly, but I don't fear these people nearly as much as I fear myself.

CHAPTER 8



Bracing himself, Peter Parker turned the page and continued reading Curt Connors' journal:

Day 19

I opened my eyes this morning and was greeted by the oddest sight.

Shimmering in the dawn light was a round, angelic face staring down at me. It was decorated with red and white streaks, like a child's face-painting. The being—it appeared to be a woman—was wearing hot-pink clothing which matched the colors of the flowers on the vines around us. Atop her night-black hair was a flowing pink headdress. I stared at the beatific face for some time, wondering from what recess of my mind I had conjured it. I was convinced I was still dreaming.

As dreams often do, this one took a turn for the worse, when I became more aware of my surroundings. I was lying on top of my backpack and canteen in a dry creek bed, surrounded by towering cliffs. There was something wrong with my clothes—they were stiff and torn, and they clung to me in a clammy fashion. Then came that metallic smell.

The unmistakable smell of blood.

I looked away from the angelic brown face and stared in horror at my shirt and pants—there were dark, red stains spattered all over them. I began to shake, because I had woken up in this condition before.

I screamed, hoping to end the terrible nightmare, and the beatific face leaped away from me. That's when I knew how bad it really was—I was awake! This was reality.

Panting, I sat up and stared at the massive canyon walls rising around me. I saw no trace of the town, railroad tracks, roads, or even a foot path. I had blacked out, and now I was

covered in blood. Oh, God, what horrible things had I done?

As I was sitting there in stunned silence, the Indian woman—the one I'd mistaken for a vision—edged a bit closer. From her sweet face, I could tell that she was concerned, and well she should have been. I probably looked as if I had been attacked by a wild beast, which had gnawed off my arm and dragged me halfway through the canyon.

Except for shock and nausea, I wasn't actually injured, although I felt dead inside, not knowing what terrible things I had done.

I just wanted to get away from this poor human being who had the misfortune to stumble upon me. Most of all, I had to get out of these clothes, and away from the horror and disgust that was surging through me. I jumped to my feet and ran.

With ease, the woman kept up with me, but she also kept a cautious distance. When I almost tripped, I began to realize that running where there were only stone, roots, and mud wasn't very smart. I slowed down and looked for a place where I might have privacy for a few moments.

Somehow my backpack had clung to me through everything, and I was anxious to see if I still had a change of clothes and this notebook. So I ducked behind a boulder, whipped my pack off my back, and opened it. Yes, nothing was missing! I ripped off my bloody rags and stuck them under some shrubs, then I put on clean clothes. I wanted to wash my face and hands, but I needed water for that. The nearest bathroom was probably a long way away, and I didn't hear any streams or rivers flowing past nearby.

Still shaky, I staggered out from behind the boulder and found my guardian angel watching me from a safe distance. I wracked my brain, trying to remember the last things I had seen and done yesterday . . . before the blackout. I hope that

writing these impressions down in my journal will help me.

My friend is watching me as I write, and I smile at her to let her know I'm all right, or at least not as insane as I look. I see that my last entry was just before matters came to a head in Acotapilas last night. At least, I *think* it was only one night ago.

I was in the *cantina* when darkness engulfed the ghost town in the Sierra Madres. After sticking my journal in my backpack, I was about to wander outside in search of a quiet corner in which to curl up and sleep. I had spent the night before in a bulldozer parked beside the road, so my standards were low. There were only two other patrons left inside the *cantina* with me, and the waitress had been missing-in-action for over an hour. I may have been naive, but I didn't think anyone would care what I did.

No sooner did I rise from the table and walk outside than the two men rose in unison and followed me. Were I in New York, I would have thought I was about to be mugged, but I was still a fatalist on this journey. Nevertheless, I had been shot at and abandoned just the night before, so I was in no hurry to bring about my demise.

I climbed over a crumbling wall and strode through one of the ruins, smelling the blossoms which hung over ancient stones like floral-patterned sheets. I ducked behind the tallest wall and tried to hide in the shadows as best I could.

I heard my two shadows talking as they approached my hiding place. I glanced over to see them smoking cigarettes, the lighted tips glowing brightly in the darkness. I didn't know what they were going to do—whether they were going to search for me all night, or eventually give up.

A jeep drove up, and I saw the flash of headlights. The bearded man from the *cantina* stepped from the vehicle, followed by the man in the tuxedo shirt, and the rest of their

gang. They strode up to my shadows, conversing in angry whispers for a few seconds.

"They say you've been writing in a book," Black Beard called out to me.

"Yes," I answered hesitantly from the shadows. "It's just a journal of my travels."

"May I see it?"

"No," I answered quickly. "I mean, it's all private, nothing that would interest you."

"I am interested in many things. Why do you need to keep this journal?"

"Like I told you in the *cantina*, I'm searching for *chupacabras*."

"That's right." He snorted. "I've heard many stories of why people come to this country—seeking gold, primitive people, revolution—but I never heard that excuse. I think I need to see your book."

My back stiffened, and my stomach twisted in a combination of fear and hunger. "My book is all in English," I pointed out. "Can you read English?"

Black Beard growled at that revelation. "When does the helicopter come for you, policeman?"

Now it was my turn to laugh, although it sounded more like a nervous twitter. "Policeman? I think you've got me mixed up with someone else, *amigo*."

I heard rocks crumbling and the sound of boots scraping against the aged stone. I ran, only to trip over the remains of a stone statue. I looked up to see Tuxedo Shirt and two others towering over me.

"There is nowhere for you to run, *gringo*," declared Tuxedo Shirt. He smiled wickedly.

"Get the book," insisted Black Beard, holding out his hand.

"No!" I said firmly.

That's when the boot came, catching me in the gut. I doubled over in pain, gasping for air. My tormentors laughed. Spots danced before my eyes, and I could feel the stump of my right arm tingling—burning with an inner flame.

I knew what that sensation meant.

"Go away!" I warned them as I writhed on the ground. "For God's sake, go away!"

Now the men hooted with laughter, and one of them spit at me and called me a name. I groveled on the ground, wracked with pain and stinging sensations all over my body. Desperately, I fumbled in my medicine bag for a piece of my snake skin. As disgusted by the idea of eating it as I was, I had to remain human, no matter the cost.

As I started to put the dried skin on my tongue, Black Beard kicked it out of my hand. "What are you doing?" he growled. "Trying to take poison?"

"No, you don't!" snarled Tuxedo Shirt.

Now it seemed as if all of them were shouting. The beating intensified, and my hold on consciousness began to slip. Or rather, I was easing into another consciousness, an altered form of existence. With a gravelly voice, I howled and groaned as I writhed on the ground, and the smugglers laughed at me.

I growled something at them—I don't remember what it was.

"What did you call me?" Black Beard rolled me over with a strike of his boot, and I remember the shocked, terrified look on his face.

"Madre de Dios!" he screamed.

The last thing I remember is looking at my hand—and seeing only a claw. Then a red haze enveloped my thoughts.

• • •

I wept for a long time after remembering that awful vision. The native woman sat on a ledge behind me and cocked her head, not knowing what to make of me. Blessedly, I can't recall anything else about last night. The blackout has claimed it all.

I must go back to Acotapilas and find out what happened. I wonder if I can make the native woman understand where I want to go. I wonder if she knows how to get to Valle del Lagarto?

Day 20

My chest is still heaving, but I think I got away from them. I have to force myself to stop and catch a breath—remain calm—so I might as well write as I do so. Scrunched down in the rocks, I don't think they can see my flashlight beam.

I'm going to try to be clinical in my descriptions and my emotions, because I can't really let myself envision these happenings in too fine a detail, not if I want to maintain my sanity. If it wasn't for this journal, I would believe that I had already lost it. For the moment, I cling to my sanity, as well as my humanity, and I intend to hold onto both of them for as long as I can.

I'll admit, it was hunger as much as anything else that forced me to go back to Acotapilas. It had been something like thirty hours, maybe longer, since I had eaten. I still had some brackish water left in my canteen, so I wasn't going to die of thirst. I picked a direction and struck off, scrambling over rocks and overgrown ledges. I'm not sure how I remembered the route, I just did.

It wasn't far to Acotapilas—about three or four miles—but it took me an entire day of precarious scampering and leaping over rough terrain. That climb through those nameless canyons was like a penitence, forcing me to return to

the scene of the crime. The quiet native woman hung back at a safe distance, as if waiting to see that I made it home all right.

Toward the end of the day, I found a foot path and was able to make much better time. The path connected to a handmade, wood-and-rope suspension bridge. On this swaying contraption, which hung hundreds of feet in the air, I crossed a gorge full of frothing rapids. It was not a hike for the faint-hearted, although a starving, half-sane person could do it.

After I spied Acotapilas in the distance, I approached cautiously. It was dark before I got close enough to hear voices and see movement on the winding streets. This gave me some hope that the destruction and mayhem had not been great. Then I heard the growl of a gas generator, and a bunch of lights went on all at once. I saw the telltale flash of beacons on a police car, and a set of high-powered headlights blinked on. Even with the light and activity, Acotapilas still looked like a ghost town.

I froze, unsure what to do. I didn't see the man rushing toward me until he was almost on top of me. It was one of the cowboys, and he looked as if he was running for his life from some unspeakable horror. I made a quick decision to pretend to be one of the interrogators.

"Halt there!" I ordered in Spanish. I shined my flashlight in the poor man's face and hoped that my weak accent wouldn't be noticed. "What exactly did you see last night?"

"*El chupacabra!*" he shrieked. "*Grande! Muy grande!*" He babbled something about "the king of the *chupacabras*" and "the massacre" before I stopped understanding him. I let him go.

My heart twisted inside my chest. For once, I hadn't gotten the blame for one of the Lizard's attacks; instead, innocent

chupacabras had taken the rap. I was both relieved and disheartened by this turn of events, but I told myself that I was fortunate there was a convenient scapegoat.

My stomach rumbled and informed me that I was going to walk into town and look for food, whether I wanted to or not. I would try to get in and out without being detected, but I was prepared with a cover story in case I was stopped and questioned. I'd say I was a hiker who had passed through here days ago. In a wide-open paradise like this, they had to be used to foolhardy *gringo* hikers.

I skirted along the railroad track and came up behind the recently thrown-together shacks. As far as I could tell, most of the attention and the lights were directed at the ruins, which corresponded with what I knew. This meant that the *cantina* could even be deserted.

Parked in the town square were more vehicles than before, including a truck that was painted like a search-and-rescue vehicle. Three body bags were stretched out on the ground in front of it. I turned my attention to the live people, the ones milling around the ruins. If they had seen me, they hadn't reacted yet. It might be that they wouldn't expect to find onlookers popping up way out here. They might assume they had already spoken to me.

Edging closer, I realized that some of the ruins in the town were new. Three ugly piles of rubble had been ugly shacks the day before, and investigators were sifting through the debris. The carnage reminded me of the story of the Three Little Pigs—the victims had probably taken refuge in those buildings, only to have them torn down like the houses of straw and sticks.

Fortunately, the *cantina* stood undamaged, having escaped the monster's wrath. I tried not to think about anything

else, except the mission at hand, as I slipped through the shadows and into the open door.

It was dark inside the *cantina*, and I had to risk using my flashlight. A quick scan of the room revealed it to be in the same condition as when I had left it. In fact, my empty cola glass from the night before sat at my table, gathering flies. I had only seen this room, with the tables and chairs, but there was another room at the back. The waitress had ducked in there a few times, so I did, too.

It was clearly the kitchen; with my stomach gnawing, I began to ransack the shelves and the pantry. At the back of the adjoining pantry I found a tall stack of tortillas wrapped in butcher's paper. They were a little stale, but I grabbed them all anyway, and stuffed them into my backpack. Actually, I kept two out, which I gobbled on the spot.

Stepping out of the *cantina*, a flashlight beam struck me in the face. "You there!" called a voice in Spanish. "What are you doing?"

"Looking for something to drink," I answered. I squinted and twisted away from the light just enough to see him—he was a handsome man with a conservative moustache, dressed in a black windbreaker.

"American?" he asked in English.

Proudly I answered in English, "Yep. I just got back from hiking the canyon for a couple of days. Great backpacking country you got here. What's going on?"

"Have you got I.D.?" asked the Mexican official with the single-mindedness of a cop.

I decided to use a tourist's best weapon, indignation. "Of course, I've got I.D., but you still haven't told me why you're stopping me. What's going on here? When the train dropped me off here the other day, it seemed peaceful enough—now it's like Grand Central Station. And the *cantina* is closed!"

"There have been several murders and destruction of property," answered the cop as if he had seen things today that he had never seen before.

"Who did it?" I asked, aghast.

He gave me a bemused smile, and I knew he was thinking of the chupacabras story. "That's restricted information. I'm sorry, sir, but you won't be able to stay in Acotapilas tonight. We can take you somewhere, but I need to see your identification."

I've said before that I was close to being irrational, and I proved it that moment by pushing the cop to the ground and dashing into the darkness.

"Hey! Stop!" he called after me, staggering to his feet. Then he yelled to his companions in Spanish, and the chase was on.

I didn't have much of a head start, but my feet knew the way after traveling the route down into the canyon twice. I flew over the foot path, trying to make the best time I could while I still had a path.

It took my pursuers a while to regroup and come after me with flashlights and, I presume, guns drawn. However, they weren't about to charge blindly down into the canyon floor as I was doing, so I widened the distance between us with every step.

A few minutes later, I glanced over my shoulder and saw a handful of lights bobbing on the path, but the majority of the cops had apparently given up.

I don't know how long I ran. Twice I saw a shadow ahead of me—it was the Indian woman.

I don't see flashlights anymore. That's not to say that the authorities have given up, or won't be back in the morning,

but I feel safe enough to sit down, finish this day's report, and eat a few tortillas.

I should be despondent. I've failed in my primary task, although I have found a place that is so remote that very few people are in jeopardy. Anybody out here ought to be prepared for just about anything. More than ever, I know I need to put distance between humanity and myself. If I don't find a cure, I swear Acotapilas is the last town I'll ever see.

Day 21

In the early dawn, I was awakened by the sound of a helicopter hacking through the misty stillness of the canyon. With the dense foliage around me, there was no danger of my being spotting from the air, but it was still startling to see this chunk of high technology zoom through the middle of a vast wilderness. I didn't even know if they were looking for me. They could have been surveyors mapping the terrain, a pilot taking tourists for a ride, or some hired thugs working on either side of the drug war.

Since leaving Acotapilas, I had stumbled along blindly, trying to stick to a path if I could find one, mostly making my own. Now it was time to get a bit more scientific in my explorations. Unfortunately, my map wasn't detailed enough—I would need a high-class topographical map and a good compass in order to really figure out where I was. I could tell from the direction of the rising sun that this gorge ran roughly southwest-northeast, which was okay, because I wanted to go southwest.

But where was Valle del Lagarto in this maze of canyons? Could I ever expect to find it on my own, or should I just set up camp somewhere, and let *them* find me?

At least I wouldn't want for breakfast; I opened up my backpack and took out my stash of stale tortillas. I don't

believe I had ever eaten anything so delicious, but I rationed myself and only ate two.

As the sun worked its way down the canyon walls, I looked around for my round-faced guardian angel. I don't know why I should have assumed she was still with me, but there she was, crouched on a ledge about a hundred feet away. Somehow she had strung up a little tent-like shelter, tethered by two saplings and constructed from her voluminous clothes.

I walked toward her, and she rose nervously to her feet. In truth, I had no intention of getting too close. I laid a couple of tortillas on a rock and instructed her in Spanish to eat.

After I backed away, she finally did come down and partake of breakfast. This cemented our friendship quite nicely, and now it was time for small talk.

I said in Spanish, "I am looking for Valle del Lagarto."

She nodded, but said nothing and continued eating. When she finished, she gestured to me to follow and strode off toward some large boulders. I eagerly followed her. After a treacherous climb, we reached a small spring under some rocks, and she pointed out the burbling water to me. That wasn't exactly what I wanted, but I was grateful to wash my face and hands and fill my canteen. I looked around, trying to imprint some landmarks on my mind, but it was hopeless in the vastness of lush greenery and soaring peaks.

I figured I needed a more effective way to communicate, so I picked up a stick and poked it into a large puddle of mud around the spring. I drew a rough approximation of a chupacabra. My friend peered over my shoulder and took considerable interest in my drawing. In fact, she corrected it and made the wings bigger.

"Better," she said in Spanish, pointing to the finished drawing.

"Can you take me to them?" I asked. She looked at me as though I were crazy. "Please," I insisted.

She laughed and nodded, then set off again across the terrain. For the rest of the day, I struggled to keep up with her.

In the library, I had read that the aboriginal inhabitants of these remote *barrancas* had no other means of transportation but their feet, and they were famous for being able to run fifty or sixty miles in mountainous terrain without stopping. They played a ball game like lacrosse, and the games lasted all day and all night. In her thin sandels, the tiny woman chewed up the trail, and I was hard-pressed to keep up with her.

Once again, I confess that I didn't pay much attention to the route we traveled—I doubt if I could duplicate it. Whatever happened, I was destined to stay in this lost land for some time, so I didn't worry. We crossed two of those terrifying suspension bridges. The first one passed right in front of a gigantic waterfall, which looked like a vertical river. As we swayed precariously back and forth, the heavy mist drenched us.

The second bridge was in terrible disrepair, and I thought I would burst through the weathered boards and plummet to my death. It seemed as if not even the native people came this way very often. Later, we crossed over a log that had been thrown casually over a deep, narrow gorge. I tried not to look down, but I heard the water surging far below.

By afternoon, we had reached a lush, damp valley, which was like a swamp but with sheer cliffs all around it. Misshapen boojum plants twisted like pythons from their spiny stalks, and there were cacti, vines, and thickets that looked as if they could eat a man whole. Even in broad daylight, only a little misty sunlight filtered down into the hidden gorge.

A pale-white fungus grew everywhere in the bog. It looked

almost like tofu, and I wondered if it was edible. If it was, I would never starve in this place. If it was poisonous, it might also be useful to keep in mind.

I decided to test my guide's knowledge of the fungus. I reached down and broke off a chunk.

"Do you know what this is?" I asked, holding up the piece.

She shrieked, ran over, and knocked it out of my mouth. "No!" she yelled, as though scolding a disobedient child. "It is deadly!"

"Sorry," I mumbled. She smiled, seemingly content with my apology, and patted me on the shoulder.

I pointed around at the foreboding vegetation and the primeval walls of rock. "Valle del Lagarto?"

She nodded somberly, then gazed upward as if watching for something. I could guess what she was looking for.

"Thank you," I said with all sincerity. I sat down on a rock and enjoyed the sense of accomplishment that comes with ending a difficult journey. I believe I wept. Yes, there was still an empty feeling inside of me, knowing what had happened the night before last and so many other times before it—but the kindness of strangers had redeemed me.

I had cut myself off from my family and civilization to come to this place of mystery and danger. Valley of the Lizard was indeed the place to be cured . . . or to die.

The journal entries ended there. Peter Parker flipped through the book's remaining pages. On the inside back cover was scrawled a hastily written note:

Martha,

I'm handing the journal over to this Indian woman. I've given her the last of my money and asked her to get this to you somehow.

I'm not certain where my path will lead me, but always remember that you and William are in my thoughts.

I love you, Martha.

Peter Parker closed the journal's battered cover and stared into space.

How long ago did this happen? he thought. *What happened to Curt between the last entry and the Lizard's appearance at the gallery? Why the fixation with pre-Columbian art?* Peter frowned. *I was hoping this thing would give me some answers—it's only left me with more questions.*

Peter slapped the notebook against the palm of his hand. He had gotten one invaluable bit of information from this tortured account, though: A place to look for Curt, Miranda Silva, and those scaly creeps with the long fangs and bad table manners.

Unfortunately, the Valley of the Lizard was a couple thousand miles away, in another country. And going there to find Curt wouldn't be cheap.

Peter steeled himself and went into the bedroom. Gently, he shook Mary Jane awake.

"What is it?" she asked groggily.

"I've finished reading Curt's journal, MJ. Your turn, now. I'll put on another pot of coffee."

"You're a darling," Mary Jane said, patting him on the cheek. She rose stiffly from the bed and shuffled toward the bathroom.

"You won't think so after I ask you what I need to ask you," Peter said.

Mary Jane paused in the doorway. "That doesn't sound good."

"Read the journal," Peter replied. "You'll see why." MJ nodded and closed the door.

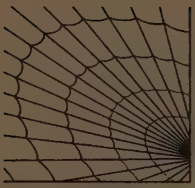
Peter gazed out the window into the relative quiet of his Queens neighborhood. The first pink streaks of dawn were brightening the starfilled sky above the neat rows of two-story

homes. A light came on in a bedroom across the street.

Probably someone else who can't sleep, Peter thought. Rubbing his weary eyes, he sighed and looked up at the early morning sky.

"I wonder what Curt is doing now . . . ?" he murmured.

CHAPTER 9



As gentle rolls of thunder and the pattering of rain on a tile roof gradually invaded his senses, Curt Connors stirred in bed. The cool sheets and fine linens caressed his weary body, and he didn't want to leave the womblike comfort. A pleasant musky scent wafted into his nostrils, awakening even more of his senses, and he could hear the crackle of a warm fire.

Curt bolted upright in the bed and gaped at his surroundings. His eyes were drawn to the logs crackling cheerfully in a stone fireplace; the flickering light revealed a room that was elegant yet simply decorated in the southwestern fashion, with earth tones of green, brown, and rust. Taking in more details of the bedroom, he saw a door, a dark window, a bathroom, and a rustic wardrobe and matching chest of drawers.

I hope there are clothes around here I can wear, he thought as he climbed slowly out of bed.

Curt padded to the chest and opened the top drawer to find a selection of men's underwear and socks. Hastily, he yanked out some clean boxers and athletic socks and put them on. A search of the rest of the drawers found them full of rather elegant women's clothes, so he turned his attention to the rough-hewn wardrobe.

There he hit the jackpot, finding a whole array of new clothes in his exact size. Somebody had been shopping for him.

"I hope they fit," purred a voice with a Spanish accent.

Curt turned to see a woman standing in the doorway. She smiled seductively at him, her black hair tumbling down over her shoulders. Curt's eyes were drawn to her short silk robe, which revealed a pair of shapely bronze legs. Quickly, Curt put on slacks and a sport shirt.

"Yes, yes, they fit perfectly," he assured her in a hoarse voice.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Well enough," answered Curt, rubbing his eyes.

She chuckled softly. "You don't know who I am, do you?"

"No," admitted Curt.

He remembered a few things: the *chupacabras* surrounding him in the Valley of the Lizard, then waking up on a suspension bridge, swaying in the breeze hundreds of feet above a roaring river. Everything after that was a red haze.

The woman tightened the robe around her slim waist. "You are deep in thought."

"Just trying to remember how I got here."

"Don't you remember being the Lizard?" she asked.

Curt tried to hide his revulsion at that name, because he didn't know what was going on here. He was human for the moment—and he wanted to stay that way—so it was best not to antagonize this beautiful woman.

Besides, she knew of his dark half, so she had the power to hurt not only him but Martha and William, too. He had to be careful around her.

"To be truthful," he answered, "I don't remember what happens when I'm the Lizard."

The mystery woman tapped a finger to her luscious lips. "That is very interesting, because the Lizard does not seem to know that he ever becomes human."

"That's how we manage to coexist," said Curt, trying to sound nonchalant about it. He looked inside the wardrobe for shoes and found an expensive pair of loafers, just his size. "What have you and . . . *it* been up to?"

The woman crossed the room and stepped extremely close to Curt. She smelt of sandalwood and jasmine.

"Many things," she answered, stroking his cheek with a long fingernail.

"Who are you?" he asked, afraid that he already knew. Curt thought of Armando's uncle Pepe and the *chupacabra* that had transformed into a beautiful woman.

"My friends and I are of an ancient race that has gone by many names—*chupacabras* is only the latest. In Europe, they called us gargoyles and dragons. We were hunted down like animals, almost to extinction.

"Hoping to find someplace where we could live in peace, our ancestors migrated to the New World, eventually settling in what became known as South America. Our people lived peacefully among the Aztecs and other tribes for a thousand years."

The woman's face darkened with anger. "Then the Europeans came here, and the killing started anew. They enslaved and killed the native people. Worst of all, they destroyed the libraries of the Aztecs, and our precious formulas were lost."

"Formulas?" asked Curt, intrigued by the scientific term.

"Yes," she answered, nodding somberly. "The *chupacabras* are a long-lived race, but we lost the ability to reproduce when our last queen died over one hundred years ago. A million of our eggs lay in dried suspension in our central cave, but the formula to rejuvenate them has been lost for five hundred years, ever since the conquistadors destroyed the libraries. Since then, we have dwindled in number while awaiting the coming of our messiah, as was prophesied in our teachings."

Her expression brightened. "Now, with the messiah's help, we have gathered enough of the old books to piece together the forumla. I have studied the texts, and I'm certain we can now perform the ritual of the Great Awakening. At last our children can live to glide on the night winds and drink the life fluid!"

Curt felt a trapdoor open in his stomach. "Your messiah?"

"*You,*" she answered, bowing respectfully. "As our part of the agreement, we will do what the Lizard demands and unite with the reptiles to destroy the human race." She frowned.

Curt looked quizzically at her. "You sound as if you don't want to destroy all the humans."

"That is true," she answered. "We would like to live peacefully with humans. I move in their world, and I know that they are not inherently evil. But if the Lizard commands us to war against them, we will."

Curt strode to the window and gazed into the darkness. He saw what looked like fields and a mountain range, soaking up a steady downpour of rain. "Where are we?"

"My *ranchito,*" she answered demurely. "In this form, I am a wealthy woman known as Miranda Silva."

"In this form?" asked Curt. "You mean, you can change back and forth at will?"

Miranda laughed. "You make it sound so strange, when you can do the same thing. We were surprised when you collapsed and took on this shape—we had never seen you do it before, in all the time you've been with us—but you are the messiah, not I. I am a shaman, a priestess. I can eat the sacred fungus and assume the shape of a human."

Curt reached to his throat for his medicine bag, but it was gone. "Where's the snake skin?" he asked, his voice rising slightly.

"It is safely stored in our cave," answered Miranda. "When you wore the bag, you became human again in a few hours. When he realized this, the Lizard broke the bag and tried to throw it away. But I have saved it for you."

Curt swallowed hard, trying to remain calm. "How long have I been the Lizard?"

"Many weeks. We have traveled to New York, Paris, and Madrid, liberating the codices and the ancient relics which belong to us. You have inspired us, my lord, with your heroic feats!"

Curt turned away. "Many weeks," he muttered in shock. He wanted to run from this place, leap from the nearest cliff before the Lizard could control his body again. But then an idea came to mind.

This fungus she was talking about, he thought. *If it allows her to change back and forth between reptile and mammal, could it do the same thing for me? Could it be the cure I came in search of?*

Curt shook his head. That was dangerous thinking, the kind of thinking that had landed him in this nightmare in the first place. He had come here seeking peace, only to have the Lizard shatter his hopes once more. The *chupacabras* were not Connors' friends—they were the Lizard's loyal subjects. The shaman had her own agenda, and it wasn't to cure the scientist of being the Lizard. That would be the same as killing her

messiah. But Curt knew that, if it were left to run wild, the Lizard would destroy the *chupacabras,* too, in the end.

"What's the next step?" he asked hoarsely.

"We go to the ancestral caves in the valley," said Miranda. "We'll fly there."

"I'm not like you," grumbled Curt. "I can't fly."

Miranda smiled. "I know. We'll take my helicopter. By dawn, the weather should clear."

"Fine," said Curt. He gazed into the fire, dreading the arrival of morning.

Peter Parker sat in his kitchen, staring at the cooling mug of coffee before him on the breakfast table. He made no move to drink any of the dark liquid. Peter heard footsteps behind him, and he turned to see Mary Jane clutching the journal to her chest. Her emerald eyes were widened in shock. It was clear that the narrative she had been reading had had a profound effect on her.

"I finished it," she said hoarsely. "I feel so bad for Curt."

Peter nodded. "So, you know I have to go there."

MJ frowned and lowered herself into a chair beside Peter. "Can you get an assignment or something? Would the *Bugle* pay you to go there? Maybe you could do a photo-story on *chupacabras.*"

Peter shook his head. "I can't imagine that JJ would *ever* pay to send me down there for that kind of story. He'd say, 'If you want to see freaks, just hang out in the Lower East Side.' "

"Can you ask him?" said MJ. "Please?"

"Oh, I'll ask him," said Peter, "but it won't do any good."

"Well, how *were* you planning to pay for a trip to Mexico?" Mary Jane asked, her voice suddenly hardening.

Peter looked down at the floor. "There's that money I made from my internship with Tony Stark."

"That's the only money we've managed to save!" protested Mary Jane. "Peter, how can you think about using up what little money we have when we're barely able to make ends meet?"

"It's for a good cause, MJ," replied Peter. "You know it is."

MJ sighed. "Why do *you* have to go? Why can't someone *else* handle this—someone with *money?*"

"Like who?"

Mary Jane looked over her shoulder to see if Martha was around, then lowered her voice and leaned forward. "Like the Fantastic Four—you're friends with Johnny Storm. Or what about the Avengers? You used to be a reserve member. Couldn't you ask Iron Man or Captain America to take care of this?"

"Curt's my friend," Peter murmured. "What kind of friend would I be if I didn't try to help him when he needs it the most?"

"But you're *always*—" Mary Jane started to yell. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "You're *always* helping him. I know you pride yourself on your sense of responsibility, Peter—it's one of the things I love about you. But when are you going to think about your responsibilities to your *family?*"

Peter opened his mouth to protest, then stopped. He lowered his eyes and stared at his coffee mug. "You're right, MJ," he said. "I'm sorry."

Peter looked up into Mary Jane's sparkling eyes. "But it's something I have to do."

Mary Jane stared at her husband for a moment, clearly at a loss for words. Peter tensed, preparing for the verbal barrage that was sure to come.

But, surprisingly, it didn't.

Mary Jane groaned. "Why do I think we'll always be broke?" She shook her head and sighed. "All right, Peter, I know better than to argue with you about something this important. I was just venting my frustrations. When were you planning on leaving?"

"As soon as possible," Peter replied. "I'll try Jonah first for the expenses, but I know he won't go for it."

Mary Jane nodded glumly. "I understand. What are you going to do about the *chupacabras*?"

"I'd like to leave them alone, as long as they leave me alone. But if the Lizard is leading them, I may have a real fight on my hands." Peter scratched his head. "I'd *still* like to find out why they're stealing pre-Columbian artwork."

"A hedge against inflation?" suggested MJ.

Peter smiled at the redhead and leaned across the table to kiss her cheek. "You're the best wife a super hero could ever have, honey."

"I bet you say that to all the super heroines you run into," Mary Jane replied with a smile.

"Only the pretty, redheaded ones," said Peter. He jumped back as MJ playfully reached out to hit him. "So, what are you doing today?"

"Another cattle call at a casting agency," said MJ, "but I think it's more important to get Martha settled somewhere."

"Do I hear people talking about me?" asked a weary voice. "My ears are burning."

Peter and Mary Jane turned to see Martha Connors enter the kitchen. Her eyes were bloodshot, the lids puffy. It was clear to Peter that she hadn't slept all that much. "I'm sorry for disrupting your lives like this. I should get a hotel room."

"Now, let's not go through *that* again, Martha," said Mary Jane. "You're welcome to stay as long as you like."

"I . . ." Martha began. She smiled, her cheeks blushing. "Thank you."

"Peter is going down to Mexico to look for Curt," said Mary Jane, sounding very positive about it.

Martha looked horrified. "Oh, no, Peter, I couldn't ask you to do that. The expense—"

"I'll get an assignment from the newspaper," claimed the photographer, knowing there wasn't a chance in hell. "But I do have a question for you. Are Curt's notes and lab equipment still stored in that warehouse in lower Manhattan?"

Martha nodded. "Yes, I don't have the key for the lock. I-I don't quite remember where it was. Curt always took care of that—"

"That's okay," said Peter. "I'll find a way to get to it."

He took the journal from Mary Jane's hands. "Can I hang onto this for a while? It might help me find him."

"Certainly," answered Martha. She touched Peter's arm. "Peter . . . if it wasn't for you and Mary Jane, I don't know what I would do. I didn't know where to turn for help. I couldn't go to the police or the Mexican authorities—"

"You came to the right place," Peter assured her. "Don't worry. I'll find Curt."

Martha's blue eyes misted with tears. "Just bring him home . . . please. William and I don't care what condition he's in—we want him home with us."

Peter nodded gravely. "I'll do my best."

Looking down from a helicopter, Curt Connors decided that the deep gorges, towering crags, and lush foliage of the Sierra Madres were even more impressive from the air than the ground. When he had been down there, slogging his way through that wild land, it seemed only dangerous and overwhelming. Up here, he could appreciate the awesome beauty without fearing for his life every second.

Miranda Silva snuggled against his shoulder. Curt grimaced at her touch. Despite her startling beauty, Miranda repulsed Curt—not because she was really a scaly harpy, but because she was in love with the Lizard! This appealing facade was no more *her* than the Lizard was *him.* As Miranda pawed him, Curt thought of Martha, who was just as beautiful. But when he thought of how he had failed her and William, that memory became too painful to hold.

Curt felt pity for Miranda and her ancient race. Despite their notoriety, the *chupacabras* were dying off, as they found it harder and harder to escape human encroachment. They were probably doomed, no matter what the Lizard might have told them.

Curt mulled over his situation. If Miranda was typical of her species, then every *chupacabra* was obedient to his alter-ego. There had to be some way to exploit that power for Curt's benefit.

As the helicopter soared between mountains that seemed to saw the sky in half, Curt's thoughts turned to his original mission, the main reason he had come here—to seek a cure.

"Miranda?" he asked. "The fungus you told me about—how does it work?"

"Those of us who have trained for many years can eat it," whispered Miranda, nuzzling his ear. "But I've seen humans eat it and become very sick, even die. The psychotropic elements are very strong." She paused. "But perhaps, in small amounts, you could take it."

"Why would I want to take it?" asked Curt, trying to sound uninterested.

"Because then you could *meet* the Lizard."

He blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"You could exist in the same place at the same time," Miranda explained. "Not on this plane, of course, but in the spirit world. I'm a shaman—my life's work is to guide my people to the spirit world, and to understand other creatures."

"But when *you* become human," said Curt, "it's more than some spiritual illusion."

"True. But then, the same could be said for you," replied Miranda.

Curt nodded. "Would it be possible for me to get a sample of this fungus?"

"Certainly," said Miranda. "Oh. Have I shown you our latest treasures?"

" 'Our'?" said Curt. "What do you mean?"

Miranda reached behind her into the luggage and produced a large, flat case, such as those used to hold artwork and portfolios. Gingerly, she unzipped the case and removed a stack of drawings that looked ancient—they weren't drawn on paper but on bark and leather. They were beautiful in their vibrant colors and intricacy, and every square inch was filled with paintings, symbols, and what seemed to be doodles.

"The pieces of the puzzle are all falling into place," said Miranda with pride. "And it's all thanks to *you*. You were the inspiration, my lord. When it came to planning the liberation

of the codices, you always knew the best way to trick the humans."

"That wasn't *me,*" grumbled Curt.

"And we killed many of the humans," added Miranda. "As you instructed."

Curt swallowed drily and gazed out the window. More blood on his hands . . .

He didn't say another word until the helicopter swooped down to the bottom of the deepest, narrowest canyon. The pilot was literally white-knuckled as he descended toward a clearing carved out of the thickets and vines. After the helicopter thudded down, the pilot opened the door for them but didn't kill the engine. The noise of the blades was deafening.

Curt scuttled like a crab out of the helicopter, splashing through shallow water until he was far enough away to leap onto firmer footing.

Miranda and the pilot unloaded two suitcases, a box of clothes, and the case containing the precious codices. Curt rushed back to help her carry the luggage, although she steadfastly held onto the codices. As soon as they were out of the way, the chopper lifted off the ground with a roar. Curt supposed Miranda didn't want anyone to spot the chopper, so it stayed only as long as was absolutely necessary.

Once again, Curt stood in the quiet, majestic wilderness of Valle del Lagarto, marveling at the vertical landscape of cliffs and mountains. It made him dizzy to look up, so he looked down to see clumps of the creamy fungus growing in the mud by the water's edge. More than ever, he was curious about its properties. If it affected only the mind, then it was similar to dozens of other plants; but if it could change a creature's physiology, then it was something rare, like the serum he had devised to regenerate his arm.

But were the side effects of the fungus just as dangerous and unpredictable as his serum? Curt couldn't judge fairly by Miranda, because she wasn't what she seemed. In addition, she had been using the plant for years and had probably developed a tolerance for any toxins found in it. Such a tolerance

might take a long time to build up in a human—time Curt didn't have.

His thoughts were interrupted by fluttering and chirping sounds, and he turned to see dozens of *chupacabras* creeping and flapping toward him. In daylight, they were even scarier than they were by moonlight, but they also looked more pathetic. Their eyes seemed to be sensitive to sunlight, which would have accounted for why they kept to the protective shadows of the surrounding foliage.

This is the army the Lizard wants to use to destroy two billion humans? Curt thought. *I don't think so . . .*

The *chupacabras* hunted small, helpless prey—they were not warriors. They were hermits, recluses, inclined to live and let live. Even if there were a million more *chupacabras*, it wouldn't be enough.

But Curt was not about to tell them the truth about the Lizard, not until he learned if his own dreams were just as foolish and misguided.

"Gather around," Miranda told the creatures. "Don't be afraid. This is our messiah in his human form. I have seem him in this shape, and so have many of you. Do not be afraid."

Relax, Curt told himself. *You can handle this. Don't let the Lizard take over.*

"Can I have my medicine bag?" he asked Miranda.

She nodded, clutching the case full of art. "It's in the cave. Come this way."

Dressed in a clinging summer dress, the shapely shaman looked rather incongruous as she strolled through a mob of crouching, winged harpies. Curt followed closely behind her, all the while trying to ignore the copper-colored eyes of the *chupacabras*. Miranda ducked under a clump of vines hanging from a ledge, and Curt dutifully followed her through the leafy curtain. In diffused light, he followed her down a passageway so small that neither one of them could stand upright. A vague smell of dust and lime assaulted his nostrils.

A few moments later, they emerged in a vast cavern with stalactites and stalagmites reaching from floor to ceiling. The

natural columns glimmered like rock candy in a shaft of light that sliced down from the ceiling. A hollow dripping sound echoed throughout the cave, and Curt peered upward to see where it was coming from. Among the stalactites were a number of dark shapes hanging from the ceiling.

With a start, Curt realized these black shapes were all *chupacabras*, hanging in repose like bats! There must have been hundreds of them. He tried to calm his thumping heart, telling himself that he wasn't in any danger. These were his subjects, after all, and they were nocturnal creatures who rested by day. He could coexist with them long enough to see if they could offer him any help.

Curt heard a hissing sound, and he turned to see Miranda motioning to him from a dark archway. He took a deep breath, waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the dim light, then followed her into the passageway.

After walking only a few feet, it got so dark that Curt fumbled for Miranda's hand, letting her lead him. In this blackness, anything could happen to him, and he tried not to show his fright. The trip through the tunnel seemed interminable, but finally Curt could see a greenish glow of light just ahead of them. He let go of Miranda's hand and quickened his pace.

They emerged into a chamber that was smaller but no less dramatic than the one outside. In the center of the room was a glowing pit filled with an eerie, phosphorescent gas. Curt inched forward to the edge of the pit and stared into its depths, where he saw a million greenish globules resting like beads at the bottom of a child's drawer. Upon closer inspection, he saw a thin membrane stretching over the eggs, and it was this membrane which apparently gave off the gas and the glow.

"Here the embryos of our children have lain for five hundred years," said Miranda solemnly, "awaiting the coming of the messiah."

Curt was speechless, because the scientist in him wanted to hatch these marvelous eggs, observe the young, and see how the *chupacabras* raised them. He wondered if there was some way that humans and the ancient race of *chupacabras* could

live together in peace, as they had when the Aztecs ruled this virgin land.

It was clear that their hiding place would be overrun someday—by tourists, developers, or drug smugglers, it didn't really matter. When that happened, the *chupacabras* would have no place to seek refuge, and they would face the same danger as all endangered species. These fascinating creatures couldn't be allowed to disappear from the Earth, if there was any way to save them!

Then Curt thought about the Lizard, who planned to recruit every one of these million new souls into an army of conquest. After waiting five hundred years to be born, they deserved a better destiny than to become foot soldiers in a pointless war.

In that solemn, peaceful chamber beneath the Sierra Madre mountain range, Curt Connors suddenly saw his duty clearly. He had to save himself, then he had to save the *chupacabras*. He had to convince them that the Lizard was not their messiah—he was their common enemy.

"From this point on," he told Miranda, "*I'll* be more useful to you than the Lizard. In my human form, I'm a research scientist, specializing in reptiles. I've hatched eggs that have sat for decades in dry river beds. I assume the formula you're talking about to rejuvenate the eggs is a chemical formula, tied into seasonal changes?"

"Yes, yes!" answered Miranda excitedly. She rushed to a large metal chest and opened it, revealing more aged drawings and pre-Columbian relics. "I can translate the codices, and the ingredients we need can be found in the native plant life around us!"

"I'll help," promised Curt, "but I'd like to have my snake skin back. It's sort of like a lucky charm for me."

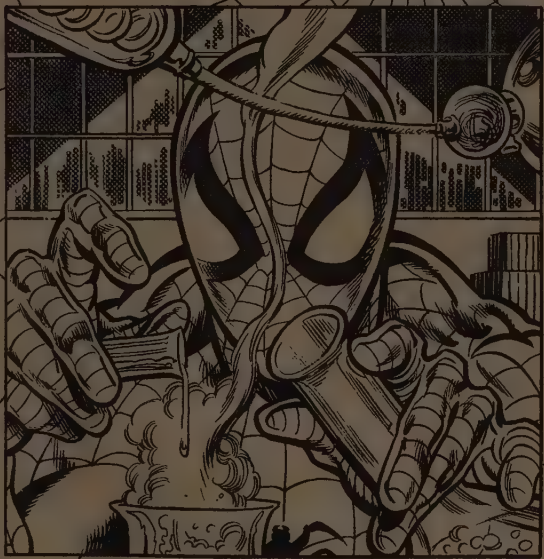
"I'll get it." Miranda smiled and reached into the chest. She took out his tattered medicine bag and handed it to him.

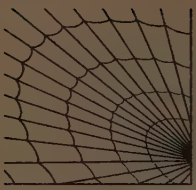
With relief, Curt looped the talisman around his neck. He had no proof that the snake skin would halt the horrible transformations, but wearing it made him feel more at ease. As long as he was occupied and focused on helping the *chupa-*

cabras hatch their eggs, maybe he could keep the Lizard at bay. And as long as he was helping them, they wouldn't miss the Lizard.

"All right," said Curt. "Let's get to work."

CHAPTER 10





J. Jonah Jameson pounded his desk. "You want me to do *what?*" he bellowed. "Send you *where?*"

Peter Parker winced at the outburst, but he held his ground, and his temper. "Listen, Jonah, these *chupacabras* are a real thing. They've been spotted by thousands of people in Latin American countries, and now they've been seen right here in New York."

Jameson picked up the notes on *chupacabras* that Peter had copied from Curt's journal. "Parker, I'm impressed by this research you've done—not that you're any Ben Urich—but this is the *Daily Bugle,* not the *National Enquirer!*" Jonah's face flushed with red. He rose to his feet and leaned across his desk, glaring at the young photographer. "This is a *newspaper,* Parker, not a tabloid! We print *news* here, not old wives' tales!"

"But these creatures have been seen here in New York!" protested Peter.

"*One* butler and *one* old lady have seen these gargoyles," growled Jameson. "That isn't exactly an epidemic. And in case you haven't noticed, we don't have many goat herds roaming along Fifth Avenue. We got as much mileage out of those weird robberies as we can hope to get."

"Then you won't pay my way to Mexico?" asked Peter, crest-fallen.

"Pay your way?" roared Jameson. "You're lucky I don't *fire* you! Did you get any photos of these 'goatsuckers' when they were committing robberies? No! Did you get photos of the Lizard's attack at that gallery opening—an event you were *attending?* No! You're slipping, Parker!"

Jonah waved his hand in a dismissive gesture. "Now stop wasting my time with this drivel and get out of my office! I have a paper to run!"

Peter sighed and exited. He knew this trip would be pointless, but he had promised Mary Jane that he would ask Jonah.

Guess it's back to the savings, Peter thought glumly. *MJ's not gonna be happy about this . . .*

• • •

As the last rays of grainy sun slid behind the Hudson River and the peaks of cement and glass, Spider-Man swooped through the darkness. In record time, he traveled from the *Daily Bugle* offices to the southern tip of Manhattan, where there were several large warehouses in proximity to the docks. One of them offered storage room-sized lockers to individuals.

When Curt Connors had packed up his New York lab and closed the house on Long Island to move to Florida, he had put all of his lab equipment, files, and notes in storage down here. Peter had helped him box it up and move, and he remembered the location well. He always had a feeling he might have to come back here someday.

Over the years, Curt had developed many variations of the anti-Lizard serum intended to cure him of his condition—a serum originally created by Spidey. Unfortunately, it seemed that every time the webslinger ran into the Lizard, the transformation back to Curt required stronger doses of the concoction.

Spidey landed on the roof of a squat, gray warehouse. It was about four stories tall—a converted factory built in the late 1890s, overlooking the Hudson River. Using a little pressure to force open the door leading to the stairs, Spidey made his way inside.

The locker I want, he thought, *is on the second floor, at the north end of the building.*

Spidey maneuvered the corridors quietly, slipping unseen past two surveillance cameras by crawling along the ceiling. Near a bank of freight elevators, his spider-sense warned him that someone was coming. A moment later, the doors of one car opened and a man walked out, pushing a cart full of boxes. The web-slinger watched as the worker passed below him, oblivious to his presence, Once the man had turned a corner, the wall-crawler continued on his way.

Seeking to avoid the stairs or the elevator, where there might be video cameras, Spidey slipped down a vertical heating vent to reach the second floor. He soon reached a corridor

with metal doors every twenty feet, each one leading to a storage locker.

This must be the place, Spidey thought. *Locker 116.*

As expected, there was a heavy-duty padlock on the door. *The key's probably in Florida, in Curt's sock drawer,* Spidey thought. He squirted a shot of webbing into the keyhole. Within seconds, the goo expanded, filling the inner workings and tripping the tumblers. The lock sprang open.

Glancing around to make sure nobody was watching, Spidey opened the door and stepped inside the musty, dusty storage locker. Fortunately, his mask acted like a filter to keep dust out of his eyes, nose, and mouth. Unfortunately, he realized that he couldn't work in here as planned, unless he cleaned up a bit.

Turning on the overhead light, Spider-Man closed the door behind him. He worked quickly, first locating the filing cabinets that contained the doctor's notes and reports. Curt was always meticulous about his records, although he usually coded entries that had something to do with the Lizard or any of his various attempts to find a cure. Since Spidey had worked often enough with the doctor, Curt's filing system and his codes were no mystery. Spidey opened the nearest cabinet and rifled through the files.

Here it is, thought Spidey, pulling out a stained file folder. He opened it up and recognized the same cramped handwriting he had just seen in Curt's journal. Unlike those heart-rending confessions, these notes were concise and dry, with chemical formulas and mathematical quotations neatly marked in the margins and footnotes.

Spidey double-checked the list of ingredients, then opened boxes of test tubes, beakers, burners, and plastic tubing to make sure that all the equipment was still usable. To his delight, he found several sealed vials containing small quantities of the materials he needed, even the most exotic ones. Apparently, Curt feared he might have to concoct the anti-Lizard serum on short notice, too.

Spidey set up the equipment. He was well into the process when his spider-sense went off, and he heard footsteps in the

corridor a moment later. Spidey had hung the padlock back on the latch, but hadn't locked it. He turned off the light, hoping that the night watchman or whoever it was wouldn't look too closely at this particular locker.

The footsteps plodded by, accompanied by off-tune whistling. A moment later, Spidey heard a door shut, and his spider-sense died down. He turned the light back on, then lit the Bunsen burner and began to heat the greenish ooze he had concocted.

Shortly after midnight, Spider-Man stepped out of the storage locker with auxiliary web-shooter cartridges loaded with the serum. He might get only one chance to stop the Lizard with it, and he would have to make sure he administered the whole dose—or it wouldn't work. Spidey still hoped he would find Curt alive and well, in full possession of his wits, but he was prepared to encounter the Lizard instead.

And with an army backing it up, the Lizard would be even less inclined to take its medicine like a good monster . . .

For Peter, the next day was a blur of different forms of transportation. First there was the bus to the airport, then a flight to Atlanta, Georgia, where he had to take a subway from one terminal to another. Then a different flight to El Paso, Texas, and a taxicab ride from the airport to the train station.

In El Paso, Peter boarded the same train that Curt had picked up much farther along the line in Mexico. He heeded the advice in Curt's journal and sprang for a first-class ticket and a reserved seat, although he didn't spend the extra amount for the observation car.

Finally, seated in his reserved seat by the window, Peter could relax and take in the scenery. Extraordinary scenery it was, too, as the land shifted gradually from plains to desert to mountains. At last the train skirted across the rims of the awesome canyons that Curt had so eloquently written about. They were all he claimed—vast gouges in the earth that were full of lush greenery, dazzling waterfalls, and no people.

The speedy train chugged up one peak and down the other, then twisted about like a boa constrictor in the narrow passes.

This was like the ultimate roller coaster ride, and Peter wished that Mary Jane could be with him to share it.

When the train began to make frequent stops at the old mining towns along the way, Peter grabbed his camera bag and his suitcase and slipped back to the restroom. There, away from prying eyes, he reassembled his web-shooters and utility belt from what looked like innocuous consumer goods in his suitcase. The subterfuge had been necessary for airport security and customs. A few minutes later, Peter emerged from the restroom and returned to his seat.

It was late in the afternoon by the time the conductor announced, "Next stop, Acotapilas!"

Peter looked worriedly out the window at the foreboding wilderness, knowing that he faced the same problem Curt had faced upon arrival: It was late in the day, and there were no other trains passing through until morning. He would be forced to spend the night in a frontier ghost town that the Lizard had torn up only a few weeks ago.

Like Curt, he also needed a guide. Unlike Curt, he didn't speak Spanish very well, so he couldn't rely on the kindness of strangers, unless they spoke English.

"Valle del Lagarto," Peter muttered under his breath, practicing his pronunciation. *"Donde está Valle del Lagarto?"*

The train slowed down. Peter took a deep breath and grabbed his suitcase. To his surprise, two middle-aged women and a long-haired couple in their thirties grabbed their hiking backpacks and camping gear and prepared to disembark. Could all of these people be going to the same forgotten mining town on the edge of nowhere? The four of them looked fit enough to do some serious hiking and exploring.

As the train rounded the bend, Peter got his first glimpse of Acotapilas, and he wasn't disappointed. The entire village seemed to be made out of clay and old popsicle sticks that had been left out in the sun too long. It wasn't exactly a ghost town, though. There were several colorful tents and awnings pitched in the rambling streets, as if a street fair was taking place.

The train squeaked to a stop in front of what looked like a log cabin, and Peter spotted half-a-dozen vehicles parked haphazardly in the street. Also on display were a couple of burros wearing sombreros, and he could only imagine they were there for the sake of tourist photos. Acotapilas seemed to be going through a reemergence, a second boom.

Peter got up and stood behind the hippie couple. As they waited for the doors to open, he remarked, "I didn't expect to find anyone here."

"Oh, man, didn't you hear about the *chupacabras*?" asked the male half of the twosome. "One night, some really big *chupacabras* came in here and killed a bunch of people. There was an article in the local papers and the word has gotten out, so a lot of people are getting off here now to check it out. But it's still rough country."

He eyed Peter suspiciously, as if noting that he wasn't prepared for backpacking or camping. "There aren't any hotels," the man added.

"I'll only be here a short time," said Peter. In truth, he should have packed more equipment just to make it look good, but he was used to traveling light.

"Acotapilas!" called a voice, and the doors of the modern passenger coach snapped open.

Peter stepped out with the others, and a few passengers boarded the train to continue south. He glanced around, thinking that the natural beauty and mystery of Acotapilas was badly marred by the obvious commercialization that had taken place. One banner over a souvenir stand had a gruesome, sideshow-quality painting of a *chupacabra* gnawing at a voluptuous female's neck.

Peter saw "For Hire" crudely painted on the door of one of the four-wheel-drive vehicles, and that was a good sign. This sudden notoriety might work to his advantage, making it easier to find an English-speaking guide with his own transportation. While the long-haired couple had their pictures taken with a burro and the two middle-aged women bought some tacos from a street vendor, Peter strolled through town.

Even with a handful of people milling in the streets, Acotapilas was still a quiet place, graced by picturesque ruins, Wild West shacks, deserted mines, and scenery that went straight up and straight down for miles. Peter wanted to see if the *cantina* that Curt had mentioned was still open, so he listened for laughter on the cool afternoon breeze. He heard it coming from an adobe house, where several muddy vehicles were parked.

Thinking about Curt's disastrous encounter with the local denizens of this town, Peter was ready for anything as he stepped through the doorway. Inside the earthy bar, he was immediately greeted by the sight of half-a-dozen men, all talking at once in accented English. None of them were energetic enough to get up from their chairs, and several of them kept playing cards and drinking.

"Hey, Mister, you need a good guide?" asked one.

"*El Grande Chupacabras* tour, only ten dollars!" claimed another.

"Look here, Mister," said a third, "don't waste your money. I show you the *real* caves of the *chupacabras*. And nice waterfalls, too!"

"Is that right?" asked Peter, mildly amused. Circulating among the customers was a pretty barmaid, who gave Peter a friendly smile. He took a seat in the corner, where a packing crate served as the table. "Do you guarantee that I'll get to see *chupacabras?*"

"Who can guarantee *that?*" scoffed a pudgy fellow with a droopy black moustache. He thought for a moment, then cocked a bushy eyebrow. "On the other hand, if you have enough money, we could stake out a goat for you and hope for the best."

"I'm fresh out of goats," said Peter.

The waitress came over and smiled at him. "Cola, beer, or mineral water?"

"Cola," answered Peter, pleased at how smoothly this was going. He watched the waitress exit into an adjacent room, which he assumed was the kitchen.

Peter leaned back and put his feet on the packing crate. "I'll make it real easy on you fellas, because I know exactly where I want to go. Who will take me to Valle del Lagarto?"

From the kitchen came the sound of glass shattering. All of the *machismo* drained from the faces around him, and the men looked away or grabbed their drinks. Two of them crossed themselves.

"Too far away," muttered the man who had been so brave a moment ago.

"No, it's not," said Peter with determination. "This is the closest town to it. I'm not saying it's going to be easy to get there, but one of you ought to be able to get me close."

"Forget it," snarled one man. He muttered something in Spanish and got up to leave, flashing Peter a dark look as he strode past.

The barmaid suddenly emerged from the kitchen, looking shaken and barely able to hold the cola and glass in her trembling hands. Averting her eyes, she set the drink in front of Peter and scurried away as if he were the devil incarnate.

"Is she all right?" he asked with concern.

"She was here the night *it* happened," said a man with a deep scar on his cheek. "That night, there was another *gringo* who wanted to go to Valle del Lagarto. After he walked out that door, the *chupacabras* came. We never saw the *gringo* again, although some people say he came back and escaped from the police."

Peter sipped his warm soda straight from the bottle. "I can't help what happened that night, but I've got to go there—to take pictures of the fungus."

"*Es una mentira,*" sniffed one of the men. Peter guessed he was being called a liar.

"Too dangerous," said another. "Can't get there from here. Maybe you'll have better luck in another town."

Before Peter could reply, five of the tour guides rose from their seats and quickly exited the *cantina.* Peter glanced around the room, his gaze falling on the pudgy man with the droopy mustache.

"I could take you there all right," the man said, "but it *is* dangerous. You must know that not even the local Indians will go to Valle del Lagarto, and they go places we could never reach. It's haunted. *Something* lives there, and after what happened in this village, nobody wants to see it again."

"I'll pay fifty dollars a day," offered Peter.

"Two hundred!" sneered the man. "And I'm crazy to do it for that."

"Seventy-five," countered Peter.

"One-hundred-and-fifty. Cash, no traveler's check."

Peter shook his head in amazement. "This is my last offer: One hundred dollars a day—fifty now and fifty when we get back."

"Plus gas!"

"Okay." He shook the man's hand. "I'm Peter Parker."

"Paco Sandoval." The man grinned and brushed back his flowing moustache with a thick finger.

Suddenly, one of the other men berated Paco in a stream of rapid-fire Spanish. All Peter caught was the word *"loco."* Paco shrugged it off and said something apparently unkind, because the other man leaped to his feet and stormed out toward the door.

As he passed Peter, he grumbled, "Both of you are gonna get all the blood sucked from your necks."

"Do you tell all the tourists that?" asked Peter. "Or just the special ones?" The man scowled and ducked out the door into the fading sunlight.

Paco roared with laughter and looked admiringly at Peter. "You look like a milk-toast kind of dude," he said, "but I'm thinking you got some *cojones* to you. Why do you really want to go to Valley of the Lizard?"

Peter took his camera out of his case. "To take photographs. I hear that if you want *chupacabras*, Valley of the Lizard is where the action is."

"Yeah, I hear that, too," said Paco with a nervous gulp.

"Wait a minute. You've never been there?"

"You're the first person I ever met who wanted to go there," said Paco. "Don't worry, I know the general direction, and we can ask the Indians. I speak their lingo."

Peter frowned suspiciously at his new guide. "I don't need to hire somebody to stumble around blindly. I'm capable of doing that on my own, so why do I need you?"

"You need me to show you where *not* to go. You stroll into the wrong field out there, and somebody might blow you away." Paco winked at him. "You get my drift."

"Okay," said Peter with a sigh. "I've got to put my faith in somebody, and it might as well be you. Do we wait until morning to leave?"

"You bet. You think I want to spend the night in Valle del Lagarto?" Paco shivered. "I think, no."

"If you know so much, where can I find a place to sleep for the night?"

"I can offer you a choice of three accommodations," said Paco jovially. "When it's not raining, you sleep on the ground. When it's raining, you sleep in the truck. Maybe for five dollars, I can rent you a sleeping bag."

Peter sighed, knowing that he was going to be nickeled and dimed to death. "Maybe you can."

"I'm going to look for maps and get some information," said Paco, hurrying out the door. "See you later."

"I'm not going anywhere," replied Peter.

After a few minutes of surly silence from the patrons who remained in the *cantina,* Peter decided to stroll outside. He grabbed his soda and tossed several dollar bills on the table for the waitress. He felt terrible about spooking her so badly, because he should have figured out that she was the one Curt had mentioned in his journal. How many pretty barmaids could Acotapilas have?

He stepped outside and surveyed the soaring crags and yawning crevasses which surrounded the quaint village. As the last rays of sunlight raced up the mountains, they deepened the shadows, making the terrain look like a jagged moonscape.

Even with people trodding its ancient streets, Acotapilas

seemed fragile and unreal, like that Scottish village which came back to life every hundred years, Brigadoon. Peter could well imagine a hundred years from now, when the place hadn't changed at all.

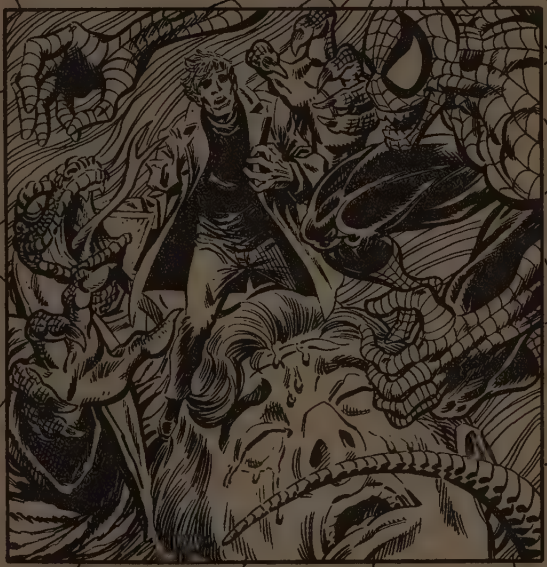
An eerie calm fell over the village. Several of the vendors quickly packed up their wares, and two vehicles started up and rumbled out of town on a nonexistent road. The tourists who had disembarked at the station with him were all gone, as if they had been ghosts.

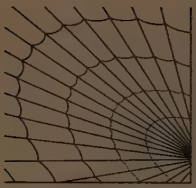
It seemed as if nobody wanted to be on the streets of Acotapilas after dark.

Peter had no choice. He didn't even know which vehicle was Paco's, or where his guide had gone. So he walked a few yards and sat down in the crumbling ruins of what looked to be a Spanish mission. From there, he watched the last rays of sun create a golden aura around the mountain peaks, like a giant's crown. And he listened to something he never heard in New York:

Silence.

CHAPTER 11





A firm grip on his shoulder and a blast of bad breath in his face awoke Peter from a sound sleep. He sat up and saw Paco but not much else, because it was still dark in the primitive village.

"How was the sleeping bag?" asked Paco with a grin.

"Fine," muttered Peter, glad that he had paid an extra five dollars for it.

"Time to go." Paco stood up and expelled a loud breath, which Peter could see in the chilly air. He gazed upward at the night sky—there might have been a tinge of dawn, but there were still plenty of stars visible.

"Come on, the early worm gets the tequila," said Paco with a grin. "It'll be daylight by the time we load up and get going."

He was right. After Paco had extorted some more money from Peter to buy tortillas, and they had stopped at a spring to fill two containers with water, it was dawn when they hit the road. Of course, there was no road in the literal sense—only a faint foot path barely wide enough to accomodate Paco's aged International Travelall. The stout Mexican wanted to get down to the bottom of the canyon as quickly as possible, and it was easier to drive down than up.

"How long will the trip take?" asked Peter, trying to ignore the spring that was poking him in the rump through the threadbare upholstery on the passenger seat. With all the bouncing they were doing on the rough terrain, it was going to be a long trip.

Paco laughed. "Well, it could be two miles that will take us six hours to drive. Are you sure you want to go to Valle del Lagarto? I know two very beautiful *señoritas,* and—"

"No, thanks," Peter interjected. He held up his left hand to show the gold wedding band around his third finger. "I'm married."

Paco shrugged. "What's your point?"

Peter sighed. It was going to be a *long* trip.

By mid-morning, they finally reached the bottom of the can-

yon. The four-by-four rumbled through wet creek beds, spewing sand and mud in all directions. The going was a bit easier, only because the ground was more level and there was no danger of plummeting hundreds of feet to certain death.

I should've hired a burro instead, Peter thought. *I'd probably have made better time.* He hissed sharply as the loose spring beneath his seat bit into his hindquarters for the hundredth time. *Now I know how a whale feels when it gets harpooned . . .*

As they bounced along, Peter was amazed to find that the vegetation had completely changed. The upper canyon was alpine, with pines, oaks, and junipers. But down here, on the canyon floor, it was more like Arizona or New Mexico, with cacti, ficus, and misshapen succulents growing among the amazing rock formations.

Beside him, Paco frowned in deep thought. "So, now, Mr. Photographer, I have to ask you something, only because this makes no sense otherwise."

"Go ahead," said Peter.

The pudgy Mexican stared at Peter. "Are you with the CIA?"

Peter burst out laughing. "No, I'm not."

Paco eyed him suspiciously. "You sure? Maybe you got your brain washed or something to make you forget."

Peter shook his head. "No, Paco, I'm just what I say I am—a photographer."

"Oh," said Paco. He seemed mildly disappointed by this news.

"Besides, if I was CIA," said Peter, "don't you think I would have had a helicopter bring me down here?"

"I guess," conceded his guide. He paused for a moment. "Unless your bosses didn't want you blowing your cover or nothin'. You know, I saw on TV once about how the CIA used college kids to go into South American countries and go spying on the big drug lords. Then they'd report back to their bosses, and the CIA would have the drug lords whacked by these special hit squads that were trained just for those kinds of missions."

"Where'd you see that?" asked Peter, more out of courtesy than any real interest. "On some news magazine show?"

"No, man," replied Paco. "I think it was on *Miami Vice.*" He scratched his head. "Or maybe it was *The A-Team.*"

Peter sighed and turned to stare out the window.

"You know the one I'm talkin' about?" asked Paco.

"No," said Peter. "I must've missed that one."

"It was great!" said Paco. "Lots of shooting, bombs going off, bad guys flying everywhere . . ." He held out his index fingers, imitating gun barrels. "Blam! Blam! *Gringos* getting whacked all over the place! You should'a seen it, man!"

"I'll catch the rerun," Peter murmured. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure, *amigo.*"

"Did you ever used to be a New York cabdriver?"

Paco shook his head and smiled. "No way. I drive better than them, right?"

"Something like that," Peter replied drily. *No, what I really meant is that he won't stop* talking! he thought. From the corner of his eye, Peter studied Paco for a moment. *Maybe if I webbed-up his mouth . . .*

"Yeah? That's good!" agreed Paco, missing the point entirely. He happily slapped Peter on the shoulder, then looked closely at the young photographer's features. "Hey, did anybody tell you that you look like Charlie Sheen?" Peter shook his head. "I ever tell you I *met* Charlie Sheen once?"

Peter closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat. "No," he sighed, "but I'm sure I'm gonna hear all about it . . ."

In the perpetual darkness and earthy coolness of the caverns, it was impossible to tell whether it was night or day. Curt Connors suspected it was day, because he hadn't heard the mass rustling of wings in the outer chamber for several hours. He glanced at his watch—he had been working for sixteen hours straight.

Miranda had been at his side every minute of that time, remaining human in deference to his choice to remain human. Other *chupacabras* had come and gone, as needed, but the

shaman was a hands-on type, like himself. She was not going to leave such important work to others.

Except for the unusual setting and unusual assistants, the past two days had been almost like Curt's old life. Formulas, theories, experimentation, and documentation made the hours fly. The equipment that had been delivered by helicopter from Miranda's *ranchito* was crude but workable. Then again, these formulas had been perfected over a thousand years ago, when the equipment was even cruder.

After making the first batch of the catalyst, they had started experimenting on the eggs. At first, Miranda refused to do this, but Curt had convinced her that she couldn't perform this grand ceremony—in which they were going to hatch a million eggs—without a dry run. There was a good chance of initial failure, considering that no one had prepared the catalyst or performed the ceremony in over five hundred years. Curt's persuasive arguments eventually won Miranda over, although reluctantly.

After failing to hatch twenty-two eggs in a row—altering the catalyst each time—it was starting to appear that Miranda's concerns were well-placed. Now it was time to try number twenty-three, and Curt had great hopes for this one. Miranda, on the other hand, was disheartened by the failures. She took each one of them personally—each mistake cost another small life.

"I'm sorry," Curt told his gloomy assistant. "We're getting closer," he said in an effort to cheer her up.

"I hope so," she muttered.

Curt dipped a syringe into a vial containing a dank brown liquid, marked Catalyst Number 23. "The next subject, please."

With a sigh, Miranda leaned over the edge of the glowing pit and used long tongs to draw an egg from the mist. The white sphere was about the size of a large gumball, and her trembling hand deposited it on a tray that had been kept as sterile as possible. She winced as Curt injected it with the syringe.

"You should really make the incision, as it says in the codex," muttered Miranda.

"We tried that on numbers ten through fifteen," Curt reminded her. "It didn't make any difference. Injection has the same effect and is neater. When the time comes, you can do everything the traditional way, if you like, but let's get there first. The nutrient, please."

Miranda nodded and brought forth a vial of rabbit's blood, drained from captured prey the night before. During his stay, Curt had learned that the *chupacabras* had the ability to consume and regurgitate blood—almost unchanged except for the addition of some enzymes which helped in digestion. In this way, not all *chupacabras* had to hunt for the life-fluid every night; a single hunter could gorge himself and bring back food for others. Curt assumed this trait was very helpful when they were raising their young.

Miranda injected the blood into the egg, as Curt checked his watch. "We're not being very efficient about this," he complained. "We should be keeping better notes."

"Notes?" Miranda shrieked. She wheeled around to face the scientist, her lips drawing back in a frightful sneer. "Our children are *dying* because of your *science,* and all you can think about is taking notes?"

Miranda stepped forward. Curt involuntarily took a step back. "We have done *all* you have asked," she continued. "Gathered equipment, provided you with proper food, even *killed* those who would stand in our way, as *you* demanded—"

"That wasn't *me!"* barked Curt.

"—and yet you calmly stand there, acting as though our children were some . . . some *experiment!"* Miranda's hand shot out with lightning speed to grasp Curt's throat. Connors gasped as her nails dug into his tender flesh, drawing blood.

Miranda's eyes flashed with anger. "You *will* save my people, Curt Connors, or, messiah or no, *I will tear out your heart."*

"Miranda," Curt gasped around her tightening fingers, "this is a very complex process. Nothing is the same as it was five hundred years ago—not the trees, not the water, not the

air, not these eggs. The Aztec priests may have resurrected them on a regular basis, but not after such a lengthy period."

Miranda studied Curt for a moment. Her eyes gleamed with a disturbing light—the kind of light usually associated with fanatics . . . or the insane.

With a grunt, she released Curt and walked a few feet away. Curt gasped and rubbed his sore throat. Keeping some distance between himself and the shaman, Curt staggered over to the tray containing the egg.

He leaned over the egg, wherein the different-colored fluids were swirling like a miniature whirlpool. "That looks promising. Bring the light closer."

Miranda grabbed a battery-powered lantern and swung it over the tray. In stunned silence, they watched the rippling colors for several moments, then Miranda gasped. Curt peered closer, his eyes widening in surprise.

There were feeble movements inside the leathery egg. Something that looked like a tiny tadpole twisted around, trying to break free.

"We should have cut the shell!" Miranda said worriedly. "It can't get out!"

"I've seen hundreds of reptiles hatch from eggs," replied Curt. "It can take hours. Give the little fellow time."

But the young *chupacabra* didn't have time, because all movement ceased inside the egg a few moments later.

In shock, Miranda gripped Curt's empty sleeve. "What is going on?" she wailed. "Is he resting?"

"I don't think so," said Curt glumly. "Let's cut it open." He performed the incision himself and opened the egg.

The tiny, salamander-shaped *chupacabra* was dead.

Miranda sobbed and beat her fists against the walls of the cave until her hands were bloody. Outside in the darkness, a chorus of *chupacabras* took up her grief-stricken moans and turned them into shrill squeals.

Ignoring Miranda's histrionics, Curt looked down at the tiny body. In his mind, he went through a checklist of the ingredients used in the revivification potion. One was an alkali extracted from a local thistle. Curt frowned. He must have mixed

too much of the alkali into the catalyst, and the toxic dose had killed the tiny creature.

Curt was confident that he could eventually hatch the remaining eggs, but he was beginning to agree with Miranda—the cost of experimentation was becoming too high.

"Miranda, no matter how it looks, we *are* making progress," he told the shaman, trying to sound confident. Wracked with grief, Miranda ignored him and continued sobbing.

"I'm going ouside," he announced, grabbing a lantern.

Curt tried to ignore the eerie wails of the *chupacabras* as he made his way through the narrow passageway. In the main chamber, the noise was overwhelming, and he dodged through the rows of stalactites and stalagmites, thinking that a thousand eyes in the ceiling were watching him with suspicion.

After squeezing through the last stretch of clammy darkness, Curt stepped into the sunshine again. The warm rays felt wonderful as they beat down on his dirty skin and musty clothes. He had felt buried alive in that cave.

Curt knew he was walking a fine line. He wanted to demonstrate his usefulness to the *chupacabras* so they would trust him, but he was in no hurry to help them reach their goal. Certainly, he was interested in hatching those eggs, but not until he was sure the Lizard would never emerge from the dark recesses of his mind to turn the *chupacabras* against humanity. He would die before he aided the Lizard in its planned extermination of humankind.

On the other hand, it was clear that humans and *chupacabras* had coexisted and aided each other for hundreds of years. The Aztec priests had been given the crucial task of recording the reproduction rites of the *chupacabras*, which showed genuine trust. Perhaps the two races could all live in peace, but not until the Lizard had been dispatched, never to return.

And Curt could only think of one possible way that might remove the threat presented by the Lizard. Now was the time for Miranda to show Curt how to use the fungus.

Hearing a rustling sound behind him, Curt turned to see two *chupacabras* come creeping out of the mouth of the cave.

They stationed themselves on either side of the entrance, using their wings to shield their reptilian faces from the sun. A moment later, Miranda stepped out and strode toward Curt. The shaman had a grim and determined look on her face, as if she had come to a conclusion.

"I think we need to take a break from the work," Curt said quietly.

"So do I," answered the woman who wasn't really a woman. "I'm not sure I can take much more of our . . . successes right now."

Curt slowly rose to his feet, looking hopeful. "Will you show me how to use the fungus?"

"It's dangerous," Miranda said. "There's a good chance you'll die. And right now, you're too valuable to our plans." She paused, then shook her head. "No, we shouldn't risk it."

"I'm willing to take the chance. If I can go to this spirit world, possibly eliminate the Lizard—" he let slip.

"You will *meet* the Lizard," Miranda corrected him. "Perhaps you can resolve your differences with him and emerge a whole being."

Curt swallowed, suddenly fearful of the outcome of this planned vision quest. If he could face the Lizard in the spirit realm, possibly learn to control it, then the risks to his health were worth the effort. But would the "whole being" Miranda was talking about be a cured Curt Connors . . . or an unstoppable Lizard, its last vestiges of humanity destroyed by its overwhelming hatred for mammals?

"You must rest now, and I must prepare," said Miranda, sounding much older—and wearier—than her outward appearance would suggest. "At sundown, we begin."

Peter Parker stood on a rock with his hands on his hips, looking disgusted. Twenty feet away, Paco's old beige International Travelall sat in the middle of a sloppy bog, tires spinning, mud spewing everywhere, and sinking deeper and deeper by the moment. A steady stream of colorful Spanish issued from Paco's lips, but it did nothing to improve the situation.

Peter seriously considered deserting his so-called guide, be-

cause there was no evidence that they were any closer to the Valley of the Lizard than when they had left. And the way things were going, there was a good chance they were going to be stuck here all day.

Peter glanced around at the sheer cliffs and lofty peaks, thinking that, as Spider-Man, he could traverse these rugged canyons ten times faster than anybody on foot, car, or burro. The only problem was, he would have no idea where he was going.

The door of the old four-by-four flew open, and Paco tumbled into the mud. He jumped up and kicked the front tire, sputtering more flustered phrases in Spanish.

"You know that fifty dollars I still owe you?" said Peter.

Paco paused, panting heavily. "Yeah."

"I don't owe it to you anymore. Our contract is finished." Peter jumped down off the rock and began walking away.

"Wait! Wait!" called Paco, running after him. "Where do you think you're going? You can't leave me out here!"

"What do you mean?" asked Peter. "*You're* the great wilderness guide, the expert on *chupacabras.* Admit it, Paco, you have no idea where we are, or where Valle del Lagarto is."

Paco stumbled after him. "Well, maybe, but it's still cruel to leave me out here. I can't desert my truck."

"You'd have to *pay* somebody to get it out of here," muttered Peter. "If you've got any suggestions, I'm waiting to hear them."

"There's an Indian camp not far from here—just over that pass. We can get some manpower to push the truck." Paco looked down at his muddy feet. "But we might have to pay them."

Peter stared at him.

"Okay," said Paco after a moment, "*you* might have to pay them. The Indians will know where Valle del Lagarto is, and they can show us. If you have to pay them, you can take it out of my share."

Peter sighed and gazed at the foreboding, mostly vertical wilderness. This vast system of canyons was like a giant maze, with impassable hedges, water hazards, and walls a thousand

feet high. He could search the area for weeks, but he might never find Curt, Miranda Silva, or the reclusive *chupacabras.*

Peter reminded himself that Curt had not gotten close to Valle del Lagarto until he had made friends with an Indian woman. The native people were the key to understanding this rugged land, not the recent arrivals like Paco.

"Is there *really* an Indian village over that ridge?" he asked doubtfully.

"On my saint of a mother's grave," swore Paco. "It's not really a village, because they're nomads, but it was here last week. We can walk right to it—get there by nightfall."

"By *nightfall?*" asked Peter in shock.

"I'll give you a second day for half-price!" claimed Paco.

Peter shook his head in amazement. "You're lucky there's no Better Business Bureau out here. Lead on."

"Let me get a canteen!" said Paco, hustling back to the vehicle. After grabbing a few essentials, he scampered up the river bank into a nasty-looking stand of cactus. "We'll find *chupacabras* for you! You'll see."

There's only one I really want to find—their leader, Peter thought as they began their hike. *The big, green, antisocial one that hates mammals . . .*

Curt Connors was blindfolded, shuffling along through a dark cave, which seemed redundant to him. But he wasn't going to quibble with a shaman about the manner of doing a sacred ritual. He could hear Miranda ahead of him, making chirps and hissing noises in a voice that was so alien it was barely recognizable as hers. Another *chupacabra* gripped Curt's hand, and the scaly skin and slippery talons felt almost reassuring.

Other people might be disturbed about having an inhuman claw lead them into an an unseen passageway, but Curt had handled reptiles for years, including venomous species far more dangerous than his strange hosts. There was only one reptile which he feared, and he had never seen it face-to-face, although he was supposed to see it tonight.

His guide led him forward, and he could hear other *chu-*

pacabras shuffling behind him. Because the floor of the cave was uneven, Curt tripped a few times; each time his apprehension went up a notch. His stomach rumbled—all he had eaten recently were a few Mexican cookies brought by the helicopter pilot.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea, Curt thought. *What do I hope to accomplish?*

Curt took a few deep breaths and reminded himself of why he had come here. He was tired of leaving a legacy of death and destruction, when he had only ever wanted to help humanity. To have come upon a place where the Lizard was not only accepted for what it was, but proclaimed a spiritual leader as well, was unexpected, but Curt couldn't let that distract him from his purpose. Since the day he had boarded that bus in Florida, he had known it was his destiny to come here. Unfortunately, what was his destiny was also the Lizard's destiny.

His guide stopped and pushed his head down with a bony claw. Curt realized that he had better duck, and he did, almost crawling into the next chamber. He was dragged rudely to his feet and marched forward again. Despite the blindfold, he could tell by the presence of a slight breeze that they had left the passageway and had entered another chamber. As he walked straight ahead, Curt assumed that the room was a large one.

Suddenly, claws slammed into his chest, pinning him to the spot. Other claws grabbed his shoulders and positioned him, and Curt began to breathe in ragged gasps. His hand was free, but he dared not touch the blindfold until he was told to do so. He heard Miranda's chirping voice and unintelligible words—he had never seen her in her *chupacabra* form, and he wasn't anxious to do so.

The blindfold was suddenly ripped from his eyes, and Curt found himself staring into a bottomless, black pit twenty feet wide! As he struggled to retreat from the gaping yaw, sharp claws jabbed him mercilessly in the back and propelled him forward. His feet slipped off the edge, and he could only scream as he plummeted into the abyss!

Although Curt had always fantasized that he would wel-

come death, he sobbed as it rushed toward him in the blackness.

He heard the fluttering of wings moments before the arms of two *chupacabras* caught him and abruptly halted his terrible descent. Like dark angels, they gripped his trembling body and lifted him upward.

"Thank you," Curt gasped out as the winged beings bore him to the lip of the pit. He held the pouch containing the snake skin in his hand.

The *chupacabras* placed him gently on the rocky floor of the chamber. Curt stumbled on his wobbly legs, feeling as if he would vomit any moment. He looked up to see Miranda standing before him. In her hand was a chunk of the fungus, which looked like a small piece of white chocolate.

"I wanted you to face death," she said, "so you would accept it calmly if it came to you later tonight."

Curt swallowed and nodded. His throat was so dry and constricted that it felt as if it was on fire—he couldn't possibly have spoken. He suddenly realized that behind Miranda's absurdly beautiful facade was a mighty shaman who was probably thousands of years old. Curt thought he was in charge here, but he was wrong. So was the Lizard, if it thought the same. The creature who went by the name of Miranda Silva was a potent force.

Behind her, half-a-dozen attending *chupacabras* bobbed and fluttered in the shadows. The only light was coming from a candle burning on the wall, and it cast an eerie glow around the chamber, which was unremarkable except for the gaping pit in the center.

"You don't have to understand what is about to take place," said Miranda. "Your own native people have beliefs similar to ours, but as you say, you don't listen much to them. I can tell you that each one of us has a 'helper' from the spirit world, and we can seek their advice. One's helper may be a panther, a wolf, a butterfly, or a monster. I think you know who yours is."

It's no helper, thought Curt angrily. *But if I could restrict the Lizard to some sort of spirit world, that's fine with me.*

Miranda gave him a concerned frown. "I sense that you need this journey badly. Eat this now, in the presence of your fear. Then we will lead you outside."

"Thank you," said Curt as Miranda placed the doughy fungus in his mouth. It tasted not unlike a mushroom, although somewhat bitter. He chewed it well before swallowing; its moisture was a welcome salve to his dried throat.

Am I going to die? he thought.

After the startling introduction to death he had just received, he decided that he could face death calmly. At least death would relieve everyone's suffering and rid the *chupacabras* of the Lizard's influence. Before, Curt had worried about Martha and William. Now, he worried about an entire race of creatures hidden in this forgotten part of the world. Would they survive to live among humans again, or would they fade into the realm of legend, like sasquatch, the yeti, and dragons?

Miranda slowly walked away from him, and a gnarled *chupacabra* stepped forward to take Curt's hand and lead him from the chamber. Silently, they followed Miranda through the dark passageway and back to the main chamber. Curt looked up at the sleeping black figures hanging among the stalactites, glad that the creatures were not yet awake.

Curt glanced back at the sprawling caverns, wondering if he could ever find his way to that pit again. Should the fungus fail to help cure him of the Lizard, Curt had already decided that he would make use of the deadly drop as a final solution to his problems. The Lizard could not be allowed to leave this valley alive.

From the main chamber, Curt knew his way out. As he walked the final steps, Curt felt amazingly well. Thus far, there were no ill effects from eating the fungus, and he wondered if he might be immune to it. *Patience,* he cautioned himself, just as he always cautioned others.

Ducking under flowering vines, Curt stepped from the mouth of the cave and into the last golden rays of twilight. Miranda motioned for him to sit upon a nearby rock. He complied, smiling happily at her and feeling confident and content.

The *chupacabras* surrounded him in a rough circle and waited patiently.

"Any hint what happens next?" he asked.

Miranda sat down beside him. "I want you to remember a place—a place where you were the happiest you've ever been. Can you think of that place?"

"That's easy," said Curt, smiling broadly. He closed his eyes and thought of the house out on Long Island, where he and Martha had been married. He thought of their wooded backyard, with the big maples and oaks, and the swing he had hung from the tallest oak for Billy. For hours it seemed, he would push his little son in that swing, and he would laugh uproariously, while Martha puttered in the garden and watched them. Was there ever a more pleasant time than that, when they had been a young family, living all their dreams?

Of course, that hadn't been enough for him. He had wanted the arm that had been cut off, the medical career that had been cut short, and the acclaim that had escaped him. Having a happy, loving family wasn't enough, not when so many things had been denied him.

As anger seethed inside Curt—anger at himself and his foolishness—his stomach began to twist and tighten. With a start, he realized that he was standing in his backyard on Long Island, watching the last of the autumn leaves blow off the gray, denuded trees. Nothing was left of the swing but two frayed ropes, and the house was boarded up. It was the last time he had visited there, during one of his desperate trips to New York to find a cure.

It was all the *Lizard's* fault. Blast the Lizard!

This outburst of anger caused Curt's stomach to heave like a rowboat on a tidal wave. A wrenching pain in his gut made him groan and drop to his hands and knees. He vomited until there was nothing left to expel from his shriveled insides. He felt like a wounded animal, reduced to pitiable suffering before he died. Curt was certain now that he *was* going to die.

The Lizard! The Lizard! His mind filled with hateful images of his scaly, green nemesis—images he knew only from the newspapers and television. There was nothing redeemable

about the Lizard, only a million reasons to loathe that abomination. The more Curt thought about the monster, the more clearly he visualized it—wearing Curt's own white lab coat, mocking its origins.

"*You're* the one who deserves to die! Not me!" shouted Curt at the quivering image that was taking form mere feet from him.

Suddenly the image solidified, and for the first time Curt Connors came face-to-face with the monster that shared his body and fate. The Lizard was more horrible and fearsome than Curt had ever imagined. Powerfully built, with a thickly-muscled tail, it was covered with bumpy plates like a tank. Its iguana-like face was all jagged teeth and bulging yellow eyes, yet it possessed a demonic intelligence. Curt recoiled, overcome with fear.

"Connorsss!" hissed the beast, swishing its tail ominously. "*You* are the mammal who is always trying to make a poison that will kill me!"

"You still don't know who you are, you pathetic fool!" shouted Curt.

The Lizard roared. "I know exactly who I am—the king of all reptiles! I am the leader who will rid the earth of the inferior mammals!"

With a powerful leap, it pounced upon Curt and drove him to the ground. The man tried desperately to crawl out from under the scaly hulk, but the Lizard had him pinned tightly. Fighting for his life, Curt looked around, trying to find a way to break free. The house and back yard were gone, replaced by a dark and misty landscape, like some long-lost moor.

"I can fight you!" cried Curt, trying to fend the monster off with one hand.

The Lizard laughed, its toothy jaws drooling saliva onto Curt's face. "For years I have searched for you, Connors. I was always a moment too late—I would find your mate or your poisons, but not you. Because you are a pathetic little mammal, you were always *afraid* to face me."

Curt squirmed under the Lizard's sharp talons. They pierced his flesh, and he cried out in pain. This wasn't going the way

he had intended—he had to find some way to fight this beast!

"You puny mammals are so weak," sneered the monster. "Shall I flail you alive? Strip off your ugly pink skin?"

The skin! thought Curt. *Strip off the skin!*

He ripped at the Lizard's face with his fingernails. Every flailing slash tore away a chunk of bumpy green scales, revealing peach-colored flesh underneath. Curt gouged at the Lizard's scalp again and again, until his own brown hair began to show through the carnage. He knew he had to rip off the skin—get down to Curt Connors, totally free of the Lizard!

The Lizard roared so loudly that the mist around them quivered. Then *it* started ripping, slashing, and tearing at Curt. Dark red viscera and peach-colored flesh flew everywhere, and the pain tore through Curt like a series of explosions.

Just one hope, Curt thought desperately. *The snake skin . . .*

Curt fumbled for the medicine bag around his neck. With only one hand, he thought he would never get the pouch open. Finally he loosened the drawstring, turned it over, and shook out the contents.

Glittery confetti poured out of the bag and floated through the air, shimmering like magical rain.

"*No!*" cried Curt. "It was supposed to work!"

The Lizard plunged a jagged claw into his chest and lifted him above its head like a piece of raw meat on a hook.

"Now, Curt Connors," it hissed happily, "you die!"

"No! No!" wailed the doctor, but the strength was already flowing from his body. Curt gasped for air, coughed violently, and spat out a plume of clotted bile. His lungs filled with blood. His body shook spasmodically and his eyes rolled back in his head, revealing blood-shot irises.

Martha . . . Curt thought weakly.

And then death claimed him.

Gathered in the darkness, hundreds of *chupacabras* began to whoop and chirp in unison. Whether they were swaying on the ground, perched on crags and ledges along the cliffs, or

hovering in the air, the creatures joined in the eerie din. As Miranda watched with pride, the Lizard stalked in front of them, exhorting its troops.

"I know you think humans are your friends," the Lizard snarled. "But they are not! These mammals are *killers* who are trying to rid the earth of all forms of life but themselves. They take what isn't theirs, they destroy the forests, they hunt us down. They are *evil*—they must be killed before they can kill us! You must join me in ridding the earth of all humans!"

There came a wild whooping of agreement, and Miranda rushed toward her leader, letting her body shift and mutate into its natural form—spindly wings, jagged spines, leathery skin, and toad-like face. She fell to her gangly knees in front of him and groveled.

"Messiah," she hissed, "a million more wait to join your army!"

"Yesss!" snarled the Lizard. "You have done well, my priestess. But we cannot wait for the children—we must kill the humans *now!* Death to *all* mammals!"

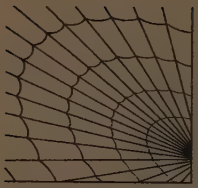
"Death to all mammals!" echoed the *chupacabras* in a tongue which no human could understand.

For the first time in hundred of years, since the coming of Pizarro and Cortés, Miranda felt alive—in command of the future, and confident of the survival of her race.

"The scent of their blood is on the wind," declared the Lizard, letting its forked tongue curl over scaly lips. "Follow me—tonight we strike our first blow!"

Hopping, creeping, and flapping, hundreds of winged reptiles followed the Lizard as it scampered across the rocks, heading toward the intense scent of humans.

CHAPTER 12



Even for someone who had been to a wide variety of places—from parallel dimensions to mystic realms to alien planets—Peter Parker could not help but be amazed by what he saw during his afternoon's hike through the Mexican jungles. Waterfalls that seemed to drop from heaven. Canyon walls covered in lush greenery. Vines full of flaming pink flowers. Rows of deformed cacti. Whitewater rapids that roared louder than any New York subway train. And above it all was a translucent streak of blue sky.

After a while, it was clear to Peter that he would need luck to find Curt Connors in this vast wilderness.

I sincerely doubt there are any signs around here saying "This Way to the Chupacabras," he thought.

Although they saw no other humans, Peter and Paco saw plenty of animal life. Birds of all sizes soared over the canyon, while dozens of creatures ranging from rabbits to mountain goats came to the water's edge to drink.

Peter's spider-sense buzzed, bringing him to an abrupt halt. He turned in a slow circle, eyes scanning the dense foliage around him for any sign of approaching danger.

Paco noticed his actions and looked around himself. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice unconsciously dropping in volume.

Peter motioned him to silence. The buzz from his spider-sense was increasing in intensity. From just ahead came the sounds of something moving through the brush. Peter shifted his body into a combat-ready position, lightly balancing his weight on the balls of his toes. If they were about to be attacked, Peter was ready to move quickly.

I just have to remember not to bring my spider-powers into play if I get into a fight, he thought. *Otherwise Paco's gonna have some story to tell when he gets back to town. And I* really *don't need people wondering why Peter Parker and Spider-Man were in Mexico at the same time.* A dozen yards ahead,

the foliage swayed as the intruder approached. *But if it's the Lizard, I might not have a choice . . .*

The vegetation parted, and a darkly-spotted jaguar stepped onto the path. Peter blinked twice, startled by the sight of the magnificent creature, then smiled.

False alarm. Thank goodness.

The jaguar gave a cursory glance at the two men, then crossed to the opposite side of the path and vanished into the lush foliage. Peter and Paco continued on their way.

The next potential danger they came across was a rickety suspension bridge that hung above a raging river. Using his spider-sense as a guide, Peter avoided the planks that might have snapped under his weight and sent him plunging into the water far below. Paco followed close behind, stepping where Peter stepped. Minutes later, they were safely on the other side.

By the end of the day, Peter had concluded that traveling on foot was the only way to really see this awesome paradise. He also planned to see it swinging from a web, but not until he knew the direction of Valle del Lagarto. Spider-Man could get just as lost out here as anyone else, only in less time.

Paco turned out to be passable company, too. Losing his truck to the mud and getting lost had humbled him a bit, and he stopped acting like the all-knowing tour guide. Despite his bulky appearance, Paco seemed to be part mountain goat—he could scamper across boulders and narrow ravines as well as Peter.

At sunset, Peter took some photographs of the dramatic shadows highlighting the crags and buttes. When nightfall began to sink upon them in earnest, he packed away his camera for the day. The darkness would make their going much slower, but it revealed something remarkable in the distance, a third of the way up the canyon—two tiny lights!

"See? I told you!" said Paco triumphantly.

"That's a *village?*" asked Peter in amazement. "It just looks like somebody left their car headlights on."

Paco grinned under his bushy moustache. "Out here, that's like the capital city."

"What will we find up there?"

"A bunch of caves and overhanging ledges," answered Paco. "The Indians have lived up there on and off for thousands of years. When summer comes and it gets hot down in the bottom, they keep moving higher where it's cooler."

"Smart," replied Peter. "Say, did you happen to bring a flashlight?"

Paco fumbled in his grubby shirt pocket and took out a little pen-sized flashlight, the kind usually given away for free with a keychain. He held it up. "Unless you count this . . . no."

"I guess we'll have to make do with it," Peter said, then stared upward. "Wow! Look at all those *stars!*"

"Yeah," Paco said admiringly. "I think that's why I keep coming back here. You don't see that in Tiajuana."

The stars filled a giant crevice in the sky, which was framed on either side by jagged black mountains. It was the kind of sight that convinced a person they were only a speck in the universe, no matter how much they might think of themselves. The magnificence of the canyon and the starscape put all of man's edifices and artifices to shame.

Humans have conquered so much of the earth, thought Peter, *but not this place. Hopefully, they never will.*

Leading the way, Peter took the pen-light and climbed until he found a path, which made the going easier as they hiked upward toward the ledge. A hundred yards from their destination, Peter could make out wide-mouthed caves and hollows in the rocks. There appeared to be tents pitched in front of each cave, or maybe they were cloth doors. At any rate, the dwellings were clearly half-cave and half-tent.

Peter heard a pleasant tinkling sound, and six domesticated goats bounded onto the trail just ahead of them. A lithe goatherd dashed after the animals, pausing momentarily to glance at Peter and Paco. The herder was swathed in so many layers of colorful cloth that Peter couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. The herder noted they were there, then paid them no further attention and shooed the goats toward the village.

"These people are kind'a shy," said Paco. "Don't ask to

take their pictures, unless you want to spend a lot of time getting to know them first."

"I need their help more than their pictures," said Peter. He gazed into the sky. "Now that it's dark, do you think we'll see some *chupacabras?*"

"Where there are goats," said Paco mysteriously, "there are usually goatsuckers."

They strolled slowly toward the tents pitched in the entrances of the caves. Peter was impressed by the ingenuity of the layout and the brightly colored fabrics. He imagined that each dwelling had to have a stone floor, ceiling, and three walls, and the fourth wall was a sturdy tarp and poles. This gave each place a considerable amount of privacy, and Peter wondered if their up-canyon homes were as nice.

The only lights came from a collection of hurricane oil lanterns, which cast strange shapes and shadows on the walls of the tents. Ropes alone were strung across the mouth of one shallow cave, turning it into a pen for the goats. The animals were quietly huddled together in a pack, watching the strangers approach.

Despite the primitive conditions, the village had a feeling of peace and timelessness about it, as if these simple people had figured out the perfect way to coexist with nature. Peter felt as if he had stumbled into Shangri-La—a forgotten, otherworldly paradise.

As the visitors trod onto the broad ledge in front of the caves, half-a-dozen villagers emerged to inspect them. They included two elders—a man and woman—the goatherd they had seen earlier, and three children. A few more people peeked out from the tent flaps. Peter doubted there were more than twenty people in the whole portable village.

Paco waved in a friendly fashion, and one of the elders waved back in recognition.

Guess Paco gets stuck out here a lot, Peter thought.

Paco and the elders spoke quickly, and Peter didn't understand a word. Paco used a great deal of gestures and body language to accentuate his end of the discussion. The elders nodded and smiled.

Peter looked over to the goatherd, who had let the colorful magenta cloths fall away to reveal a young woman with an attractive, round face. The herder glanced at him and smiled shyly before she went back to listening to the conversation.

When the word *chupacabras* was mentioned, Peter also returned his attention to Paco and the elders. Now the villagers were frowning, and the young woman glanced nervously at her goats in the pen. When Paco mentioned Valle del Lagarto, the old man shook his head and walked away.

Paco walked over to Peter. "They'll help us get the truck out, but it won't be until tomorrow morning."

Peter nodded. "What did they say when you asked them about *chupacabras* and Valle del Lagarto?"

Paco smiled. "They said the same thing *I've* been saying the whole time—you're *crazy*. Man, *everybody* says you should stay away from that place. Strange stuff happens up there—helicopters, space aliens—"

"Always a good sign," Peter said. "I still need to get there, though."

"Why? I tell you, man, even *these* people don't go to that place."

"I have my reasons," answered Peter, setting his jaw firmly.

"Well, they know where it is, so they can point you in the right direction." Paco frowned. "But you don't have enough supplies or equipment to stay out here for days—and it'll *take* you a few days, on foot."

Peter tried not to smile. "I'm pretty resourceful. I can get around quickly."

Paco nodded. "Yeah, I saw you skipping over those bridges and rocks back there like you were on a playground. But Valle del Lagarto is no playground. You should think about leaving with me."

"If I could, I would, *amigo*. But I can't."

Paco shrugged. "Suit yourself, *amigo*."

Getting to the valley is the least *of my worries,* Peter thought. *Trying to get Curt out of a whole nest of those crea-*

tures is my biggest *problem. That is, of course, if Curt is the one I find when I get there, and not the Lizard. If it's ol' forked-tongue, I'll have more trouble on my hands than one little web-slinger might be able to handle.*

Peter stared into the distance for a moment, then frowned. *But what if the Lizard and his playmates aren't in the valley anymore? What if they've moved on? They've been to New York and who-knows-where-else. Miranda Silva certainly has all the resources anyone would need—private jets, money, places to hide out.* He grimaced. *I don't know what would be worse—fighting off the Lizard and an army of* chupacabras, *or telling Mary Jane that I blew the last of our savings on a wasted trip.*

Peter shook his head. *Mary Jane would tell me not to be so hard on myself. I followed the only clues I had to the only logical place to look. I'd better concentrate on the job at hand and have a good look around.*

Paco took a wad of tortillas out of his pack and began munching on the crumbs. He extended the dough toward Peter. "You want some?" he asked.

"No thanks," said Peter. He had a few tortillas of his own, but he was trying to conserve them. Food could be a real problem in this wilderness, unless one was a predator and could hunt. That was another thing that was depressing him.

As Peter mulled over his worries, three boys about ten or twelve years old dashed out of the caves. They carried a lamp, a wooden ball, and some curious wooden bats that were curled slightly at one end like *jai alai* sticks, only not as curved. They set down the lamp in order to give themselves some light on their playing field, which was apparently the path. There was no other clear area in sight.

They put on the most amazing display, chasing the wooden ball up and down the path, slapping it with their sticks. It was a cooperative game, with all three boys doing their part to keep the ball bouncing along the trail, not into the thickets or off the cliff. Whether this demonstration was for the sake of the visitors, or these boys practiced every night about this

time, Peter couldn't tell. But the impromptu entertainment cheered him up, and he decided that he shouldn't fret about this trip.

"They play this game all night, for days on end," explained Paco. "They can run fifty or sixty miles without getting tired. They're like roadrunners."

"Will the people let us sleep here in their village?" asked Peter.

Paco chuckled. "These people are nomads, and the whole canyon system is their home. They don't understand the idea of owning the land—as if anyone could own this land. We're as free to sit and sleep on this spot as they are. It wouldn't occur to them to make us leave. Sometimes so much hospitality gets them into trouble."

"What do you mean?"

"They have little fields all over for growing corn and beans, but the drug growers take their best fields and chase them away," said Paco. "The growers have guns and bad *hombres,* and the Indians are peaceful. They never fight. First the Spaniards, then the Apaches, then the gold hunters, and the mining companies, the smugglers, and the government—always somebody wants them to disappear." He sighed. "Someday they will."

As Peter and Paco sat in the dark shadows of the cliff side, a few more villagers came out of the tents to sit and watch the ball game. Peter noticed the elders and the goatherd they had met earlier. One of the tribesmen hauled out an old automobile tire and began to carve it.

Peter watched this operation with fascination. "What's he doing with that old tire?"

"Making *huaraches,*" answered Paco. "Those are the sandals they all wear. They use old tires to make the soles. These people don't have much, and they don't waste anything."

"I see," said Peter absently. He was a little anxious to look around, to do something. Just sitting here, waiting for the night to leisurely run its course, would be wonderfully relaxing under any other circumstances, but Peter was down here on busi-

ness. Besides, he was a city dweller. How much peace and quiet could he reasonably stand?

The goatherd got up and checked the goats in the pen inside the small cave. On her return, she passed by Peter. The young photographer decided that it was time he started to communicate.

"Do you worry about *chupacabras?*" he asked the woman. He stressed the last word, hoping she would understand him.

The herder stopped and stared at him as if he had brought up a forbidden subject. She replied in a rapid stream of words. Peter glanced at his guide for a translation.

Paco snorted. "She's more worried about *you.*"

"Tell her I appreciate the concern. Can you ask her if she's ever seen a *chupacabra?*"

Looking mildly embarrassed, Paco translated the question. The young woman looked frankly at Peter with her dark eyes, then nodded.

"Where do they live?" Peter asked. "*Dondè esta Valle del Lagarto?*"

The woman looked around for a moment, then pointed over her shoulder to the northwest.

"Thank you," said Peter, smiling. At least he had a direction. She started to walk away, and he called, "Please, wait!" The woman halted and turned to face him.

Peter turned to Paco. "Ask her if she's seen an American man in the area—a man with only one arm."

Paco's eyes flew open. "You mean, the guy they saw in Acotapilas? The one who asked to go to Valle del Lagarto just before the *chupacabra* attacked?"

"I guess that was him," said Peter, trying to be circumspect.

Paco shook a stubby finger at him. "I *knew* you had more than photography in mind! What are you, a cop?"

Peter ignored Paco's question, then noticed that the woman and her neighbors appeared distressed at the brief argument. He turned to Paco. "Lower your voice, would you? Look, tomorrow I'll pay you the fifty dollars I owe you, and we'll

go our separate ways. For now, though, I still need your help. Please ask her about the one-armed man—don't ask *me* about him. I'll explain later, if I can."

Paco narrowed his eyes at Peter for an instant, then turned and smiled at the goatherd. Loudly enough for everyone to hear, he asked Peter's question about Curt Connors.

Their honest, round faces instantly betrayed that they knew of Curt's presence. Everyone looked to the elder who had first spoken to Paco, and he carefully considered his answer before giving it.

The guide translated, "A woman from another village found him and looked after him. I guess he was sick, or something—I couldn't understand it all. They can send a runner to the other village and bring the woman here."

"They would do that?" asked Peter, amazed.

Paco shrugged. "They offered to."

Peter smiled and nodded at his generous hosts. "Yes. Thank you very much."

Paco stretched out on the bare ground and groaned contentedly. "Oh, man, all of my muscles are ragged out. I gotta sleep. Just make sure I don't roll off the cliff."

Paco was fading fast, but before he could fall asleep, the young herder shook him awake and pointed to someplace near the goat pen. She motioned for him and Peter to follow her, and the visitors rose wearily to their feet. Peter glanced back at the elders and saw them waving in a friendly fashion, so he followed.

She led them past the goat pen to an unused cave that smelled of urine and stale hay. Nevertheless, it was a free accommodation for the night, and both travelers nodded gratefully to her. Paco dove right in and curled up in the rear of the cave, which would be the warmer section as the night got colder.

"Wish we'd brought the sleeping bags," Peter mumbled. He looked back to see the goatherd standing in the entrance. "Goodnight," he said. She smiled demurely and exited.

Peter settled down for the night, pulling clumps of hay over himself to create a rough blanket. As he drifted off to sleep,

he could hear the young boys still playing their strange game. Making himself as comfortable as possible on the cool stone floor, Peter sighed softly and soon fell asleep—

—only to be jolted awake moments later as his spider-sense shrieked out a warning!

Peter leaped to his feet and ran for the cave entrance. Standing once more on the ledge, he looked around, ignoring the stares of the villagers who had been watching the ball game.

The danger was strong and imminent. Looking straight up, Peter stared at the millions of stars that blazed overhead . . . and the dark shapes that were silhouetted in the strong moonlight. Shapes that were moving in the direction of the village!

Peter ran over and grabbed the smallest of the three ball-playing children. "Run!" he shouted at the others, shooing them toward the cave.

The children screamed in terror at the crazy *gringo* and ran for the safety of their homes, which was fine with Peter. He set down the child he'd been carrying by the tent flap and pushed him inside.

The sound of beating wings filled the night air—a sound that grew louder every moment.

From somewhere in the darkness came a blood-chilling roar that Peter knew all too well.

So much for worrying that the Lizard had left for parts unknown, Peter thought.

Ducking into a patch of shadow, Peter quickly shrugged out of his clothes, revealing the red-and-blue, web-patterned costume that he wore underneath.

Moments later, a wave of *chupacabras* landed on the ledge like paratroopers, swiftly folding their wings and stalking toward the tents. The villagers outside shouted warnings and ran for their lives as the bizarre creatures leaped after them.

Springing from the shadows, the amazing Spider-Man landed between the *chupacabras* and their intended prey.

"It figures," quipped Spidey. "I come down to Mexico to get away from weirdos and wackos in the U.S. and what's the

first thing that happens? I run into a bunch of sports fans who go parachuting into the middle of a ball game!''

The *chupacabras* growled and advanced on the wall-crawler.

''Hey, it was just a joke, guys,'' said Spidey. He took a step back, ready for the attack he knew was coming.

Angrily hissing like a broken steam pipe, a *chupacabra* launched itself at Spider-Man, its deadly claws extended. The web-slinger ducked down, grabbed the creature by its arms as it passed overhead, and flung it to one side. The *chupacabra* slammed against the cave wall and crumpled to the ground, unconscious.

The creature's companions swarmed forward, coming at Spider-Man from all sides.

''It's always nice being popular,'' said Spidey as he leaped, twisted, and dove out of the way of his grotesque assailants, ''but I think you fellas are going *waaay* overboard with making me feel wanted.''

A second wave of wiry gargoyles landed on the broad ledge. They swiftly headed toward the makeshift tents.

Behind the white plastic lenses of his mask, Spider-Man's eyes widened in surprise. ''This place is getting busier than Grand Central Station,'' he muttered.

People inside the caves were screaming and yelling as they realized they were being attacked. Unwilling to be slaughtered like animals, the villagers launched a counterstrike, using fists, knives, tools—whatever they could find. One of the oil lamps was knocked against a tent flap, and the tent burst into flames, lending a hellish cast of orange light to the bedlam. When *chupacabras* began fleeing from the flames, villagers picked up other lanterns and gave chase.

Caught up in his own battle, Spidey had only a moment to look around for a sign of the Lizard before he was forced to go back on the offensive. Slowly but steadily, he was beating back his assailants, who seemed to be tiring easily.

Maybe they're not used to all this fighting, the web-slinger thought, just as a razor-sharp set of claws raked the air where

his head had been a moment before. *Then again, maybe they are. Either way, I've gotta put an end to this before someone gets hurt or killed . . . like* me.

A banshee-like scream caught his attention. Paco stumbled out of the cave, fighting off a *chupacabra* that was trying to rip open his throat.

"Okay, *that's* it!" yelled Spidey. "*Nobody's* getting their blood drained while *I'm* around!" Lashing out with his feet and fists, he made quick work of his few remaining opponents, then turned his attention to Paco.

The burly tour guide was unconscious and pinned down by the creature's powerful talons. The *chupacabra* opened its mouth to expose its needle-like fangs. With a hiss of satisfaction, it leaned down to sink its teeth into Paco's throat.

From a running start, Spider-Man leaped over to the cave entrance, and crashed into the *chupacabra.* The impact sent the creature spiraling across the ledge. Before it could rise, Spidey spun around and fired his web-shooters, coating the creature with artificial adhesive, making certain to tangle its wings.

"You're grounded, young man!" Spidey yelled at the creature.

The *chupacabra* struggled futilely, shrieking in anger.

Spidey knelt beside Paco and felt the guide's neck for a pulse. Paco groaned. The wall-crawler breathed a sigh of relief.

A shrill scream brought his attention back to the problem at hand. Spidey turned to see a woman chasing after two of the winged hellions who were trying to carry off a child. Spider-Man bounded toward them, somersaulted through the air, and planted a foot in the *chupacabras'* faces, sending them careening into the night. The youngster dropped to the ground and stared with widened eyes at his unlikely savior.

"No charge for the rescue, chief," Spidey said flippantly. The boy jumped to his feet, darted between the combatants, and escaped back into the meagre protection of the caves.

A sharp jolt from his spider-sense caused the web-slinger

to turn toward the path that led up to the ledge.

Bellowing with rage, the Lizard bounded onto the ledge. "Death to all mammals!" it shouted. Intent on leading its troops, the Lizard seemed unaware of Spider-Man's presence.

How's that *for a fine how-do-you-do?* thought Spidey. *I come all this way down to Mexico, and the Lizard doesn't even stop to at least growl in my direction. If I weren't the dashing, self-assured type, I think my feelings would be hurt.* He shrugged. *Oh, well. I can always fix* that.

Bounding across the battlefield, Spider-Man leaped above the human and nonhuman combatants, making his way toward the reptilian general leading the attack. With a graceful flip, he soared above two lunging *chupacabras*—causing them to slam their heads together and collapse—and landed beside the Lizard.

"Wha—?" the monster started to say.

Without giving the Lizard time to focus on the situation, Spider-Man delivered two brutal punches to its snout. Stunned by the blows, the creature staggered back.

"S-Spider-Man!" it sputtered in surprise.

"I just bought a time-share down here, Liz," said Spidey. "If I'd known the kind of troublesome neighbors I'd have to put up with, I would've reconsidered!" He leaped up and twirled in the air, delivering a roundhouse kick that slammed his foe against the cave wall.

"Enough!" roared the Lizard. "Now you die!"

Leaping to its feet, the monster lashed out with its tail. The web-slinger jumped up to avoid the deadly appendage, only to be slammed from behind by a *chupacabra.* Both combatants went tumbling toward the edge of the cliff. As they rolled across the ground, the Lizard's minions scratched and bit at the wall-crawler.

"Hey, what is this?" Spidey said. "Some kind of tag-team wrestling match? You don't see me working with the Hulk around here, do you?" He delivered a devastating uppercut to the *chupacabra*'s jaw. The gargoyle-like creature sighed and dropped, senseless, to the rough stone surface.

Spider-Man scrambled to his feet only to come face-to-face with the self-proclaimed king of all reptiles.

"Now you die!" hissed the monster.

The Lizard raced forward, but Spider-Man leaped out of its path. He landed on a small outcropping above the cave entrance.

I've gotta find some way to lure the Lizard and his cronies away from the village, Spidey thought. *Maybe if I make him mad enough . . .*

"Hey, Lizzy!" he called back to the Lizard. "You don't need all these goatsuckers to back you up. What's wrong—can't handle one little arachnid by yourself? You must be losing your touch!"

The monster roared in anger. It scrambled up the side of the cliff, giving chase to the web-spinner, who continued climbing higher.

Keeping beyond the range of the Lizard's impressive leaping ability, Spidey led it up the mountain as far as he could.

If I'm lucky, the Lizard'll get angry enough to become careless, thought Spidey. *Then I might get a chance to use the serum on it and change it back to Curt Connors.* He reached to his utility belt to remove one of the serum-filled web-cartridges.

"You are *running* from me," the Lizard snarled. "Just like a cowardly mammal."

"Sticks and stones, Liz," answered the web-slinger. "You don't hear me talking about that iguana-breath of yours, do you?"

The Lizard shook a massive fist at him. "I will take *great* pleasure in tearing out your heart!"

"Yeah, well, I'm sure it'll go well with a nice bottle of chianti," quipped Spidey. He rolled up his right glove to expose the gleaming metal and plastic of his web-shooter, then moved to click the antidote cartridge into place on the metal band. "Speaking of nice things to drink, I've got something—"

With an inhuman roar, the Lizard leaped forward to close

the distance between them. It collided with Spider-Man before he could leap aside. The impact slammed the wall-crawler against the rock wall, driving the air from his lungs. Dazed, gasping for breath, Spider-Man lost his hold on the serum-cartridge. The metal clip skipped downward along the cliff face and disappeared into the darkness.

Now with the upper hand, the Lizard rained blow after blow upon the web-spinner's body and head. Spike-like talons raked across the hero's chest, leaving behind bloody gashes. An elbow caught him in the temple and bounced his head against the unyielding rock. Weakly, Spider-Man raised his arms to try to defend himself, but the Lizard batted them aside and slashed at his face and neck.

"Where are your insipid taunts, mammal?" crowed the Lizard. "Is there nothing about this situation that amuses you?"

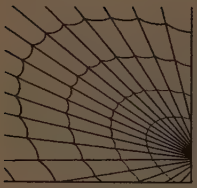
"Only your . . . ugly . . . face . . ." Spider-Man croaked. A scaly fist collided with his jaw and the web-slinger went limp.

The Lizard lifted the bloodied hero with one hand, then shook him like a rag doll. Satisfied that its foe was unconscious, the Lizard roared in triumph. Down on the ledge, the battle came to an abrupt halt as the Lizard's cry echoed through the canyon. The combatants looked up to see the monster holding its prey above its head.

"Do you see, my minions?" it bellowed to the *chupacabras*. "*This* is how we deal with mammals!" The monster shook Spider-Man to emphasize its point. "This one dared to oppose the king of all reptiles! And what will his reward be? *DEATH!* As *all* mammals shall soon learn!"

As its followers shrieked in approval, the Lizard flung Spider-Man over the ledge and into the surrounding darkness.

CHAPTER 13



It was the rush of wind in his ears that brought Spider-Man back to consciousness.

"Wha . . . ?" he mumbled, fighting to clear his murky thoughts.

Then the reality of his situation hit him.

Falling! I'm falling!

He looked down, saw the treeline rushing to meet him. Seconds away from impact, there was no way to halt his descent.

"This is *really* gonna hurt!" Spider-Man cried.

It did.

The first few branches scraped his arms and legs, slapped his face, tore at his costume. The next line of foliage struck harder, each blow delivered with the power of a line drive. Spider-Man twisted and turned, hoping to avoid the larger branches further down. He succeeded . . . for the most part.

Just above ground level, a branch as thick as a telephone pole caught the web-slinger in the ribs. Spider-Man gasped, the air smashed from his lungs. He heard the distinctive sound of bones cracking.

The impact with the limb spun him head over heels. His head scraped against the rough bark of the tree.

And then the valley floor rose up to catch him.

Paco Sandoval groaned loudly. His head ached, his body ached, and something close by smelled awful.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. Leaning over him was a *chupacabra,* its yellowish fangs and crimson eyes inches from his face. It was the creature's breath that Paco had smelled—an exhalation heavy with the stench of rotted fruit and decayed teeth.

"YAAHH!!" Paco screamed. He lashed out with a meaty fist, catching the gargoyle-like reptile in the temple. The creature shrieked and hopped back. It rubbed its head and glared at Paco, but made no move to approach him.

Paco sat up. The last thing he remembered was being

dragged from the cave by one of the grotesqueries; after that . . . nothing. He looked around.

At the far end of the ledge, the villagers had been herded together by the swarm of *chupacabras.* Paco's eyes widened in shock as he caught sight of the creatures' leader. It looked like some bizarre mockery of a man in its jeans and white lab coat. But there was nothing human about its quick movements or its thick, prehensile tail, which swayed in response to the monster's exaggerated gestures.

"Do you understand *now,* mammals?" the monster bellowed. The villagers shrank back, unable to understand the Lizard's words, but well aware of the danger the creature presented. Paco noticed a mother trying to hush her weeping children. It was clear that she was hoping to keep the monster from becoming more agitated and striking out to silence her offspring while it ranted.

The Lizard towered above its captives. "Like my long-deceased brethren, the dinosaurs, your time on this planet has come to an end! The moment has arrived for reptiles to reclaim what is rightfully ours—the Earth! There is no room for your kind any more!" It gestured toward the edge of the cliff. "Already, one fool has fallen before me—the rest of you will soon join him! And then your entire *race* will follow shortly after that!"

Paco frowned. " 'One fool' . . . ?" He gazed around the area, then stared intently at the crowd. Someone was missing . . .

"The *gringo*!" he whispered hoarsely. Paco crossed himself. *"Madre de Dios . . ."*

A half-mile below, the *gringo*—known in super hero circles as Spider-Man—moaned and opened his eyes. His back hurt, his neck hurt, even his *hair* hurt. Lying on his back on the valley floor, he resembled an action figure whose limbs had been twisted out of shape by a sadistic child.

"Attacked by goatsuckers, tossed off cliffs by man-hating reptile-men, getting your body smashed by killer trees . . ."

Spidey groaned. "I guess this is the part of Mexico they don't mention in the travel brochures."

He raised his head, instantly regretting the move. Large black spots danced before his eyes as a wave of nausea swept over his senses. Fighting the bile rising in his throat, the wall-crawler propped himself up on his elbows. He breathed deeply, then gasped as a sharp pain stabbed through his torso—sharp enough to almost cause him to black out.

I think I finally succeeded in busting those ribs I bruised back in New York, Spider-Man thought hazily. *Good to know I haven't lost my touch for racking up injuries . . .*

Forcing himself to his feet, Spider-Man leaned against a tree to assess the damage to his body. His head was pounding like a drum solo—he was possibly suffering from a concussion. His arms and legs were scraped and bruised. Two fingers on his left hand were dislocated and bent at an awkward angle. He had at least two cracked ribs, which made every breath sheer agony, not to mention countless deep cuts and bruises from the Lizard's attack. His costume was torn in several places, and his left web-shooter had been turned into a mangled metal bracelet by tree branch strikes.

Grasping his dislocated fingers, Spider-Man forced them back into position. Again, he fought down a wave of blackness, then continued with his work. Using his working web-shooter, he bound the fingers together. It rendered his hand pretty much useless, but it would give his extraordinary healing factor time to repair the damage. More webbing was used to create a rough bandage so he could tape his injured ribs.

Reaching for a fresh web-cartridge, Spidey noticed a green solution oozing from his utility belt.

"The serum!" he cried. Unbuckling the belt, he inspected the cartridges he had filled with Curt Connors' formula. One had been lost during the fight with the Lizard; a second—he now discovered—had broken in the fall. That left one cartridge—Curt's last chance at regaining his humanity.

In addition, the spider-signal in the center of the belt had

been smashed, which meant he'd have no portable light to guide him back to the path.

A mixture of inhuman shrieks and human screams drifted down from the ledge high above. Spider-Man winced as he stepped away from the tree.

"Gotta get up there," he rasped. "Can't let the Lizard . . . harm . . . those people . . ."

Moving as quickly as his body would allow, Spider-Man stumbled in the direction of the path leading to the ledge.

Paco was hauled to his feet by a pair of *chupacabras*—one of them was the creature the tour guide had struck in the head.

"Hey! Watch the claws!" the guide yelled as the grotesqueries dragged him toward the huddled villagers. "I bruise easy!"

The creatures ignored him and casually tossed him into the group of terrified humans. Paco brushed dirt off his clothes and staggered to his feet.

"I *knew* I should'a stayed in Acotapilas," he muttered. "A hundred bucks isn't worth *this* kind'a trouble."

The Lizard glared at its captives, clearly disgusted by all the soft, tanned flesh it saw. It turned to face the *chupacabras*. "Now, my acolytes," it rasped, "the time has come to dispose of these . . . *things*." It gestured toward the villagers. "Rend their flesh! Devour their hearts! Gorge yourselves on their blood! Let no mammal leave this canyon alive!"

The *chupacabras* chittered excitedly and began moving forward, claws extended. The villagers shrieked and tried to run, but the creatures had formed a rough semicircle around them. With their backs against the cold stone of the cliff face, the humans could only tremble in each other's arms and wait for the slaughter to begin.

Paco squeezed his eyes shut, a child-like attempt to banish a bogeyman. He knew it was a useless gesture—he could still see the gargoyles in his mind's eye—but there was nothing else he could do. He softly prayed for a swift death.

A shrill cry cut through his thoughts. Paco shivered—the

killing had started. But why, then, had *he* not been attacked? Why didn't he feel the sharp pain of dagger-like fangs piercing his throat? Slowly, he opened his eyes.

The *chupacabras* were in a frenzy. They shrieked painfully, hopping about in distress.

"No, you fools!" the Lizard angrily roared at its minions. "Strike down the humans! Strike now!" It grabbed a pair of the creatures in its mighty claws and tried pushing them toward the villagers. The *chupacabras* pulled away and took to the air.

Paco stared in shock at the scene of confusion. "What the hell is goin' on?" he murmured. He looked around, trying to locate the source of the *chupacabras'* anxiety.

The villagers were still huddled together, frozen with fear by the creatures' antics. There was no sign of a cavalry of United States soldiers riding to the rescue, like in John Wayne westerns. No government strike teams led by Arnold Schwarzenegger, descending on ropes from unmarked helicopters, like Paco had seen in the film *Predator.*

Paco looked skyward. To the east, just above the lip of the canyon, the first pink streaks of dawn were diluting the deep black of nightfall. The burly guide couldn't help but smile as the *chupacabras* ran around in a panic and began flying toward the west. He now knew that he and the villagers were going to survive.

Like traditional vampires, the goatsuckers were terrified of sunlight!

"Come back!" the Lizard yelled at its retreating troops. The *chupacabras* ignored their leader as they tried to outrace the rising sun. Despite its protests, the Lizard was picked up by two of the creatures and borne aloft. Though unwilling to continue their attack, it was obvious that the goatsuckers were not about to leave their messiah behind. The Lizard's cries of outrage echoed off the canyon walls as it was carried off.

Paco slumped against the cliff face, the strength draining from his body. He laughed nervously, then rubbed bleary eyes with the heels of his hands. He turned his head to face a vil-

lager standing beside him, noticed with some surprise it was the young goatherd.

"Some night, huh, *chica*?" the tour guide asked. He flashed a weak smile.

The woman pressed her face against his chest and began sobbing. Paco wrapped an arm around her shoulders, then softly stroked her hair with his other hand.

"Honey, I know *just* how you feel . . ." he murmured.

Spider-Man had just reached the edge of the village when the *chupacabras* began fleeing. He noted the rising sun in the distance and saw with relief that no one had apparently been harmed. The wall-crawler watched as the Lizard was pulled away from its intended victims.

As the Lizard passed overhead, Spider-Man threw at the monster a small device that had been attached to the hero's utility belt. The device was called a spider-tracer—a homing beacon that transmitted a signal attuned to the web-slinger's spider-sense.

Spider-Man smiled grimly as he saw the tracer stick to the bottom of the Lizard's frayed lab coat. "Guess I won't need a guide to find Valle del Lagarto after all."

Triggering his remaining web-shooter, Spider-Man shot a line to a rocky outcropping and set off after his scaly arch-enemy.

Miranda Silva was worried.

Drifting through the egg chamber, boot heels clicking noisily in the vast cavern, she nervously chewed on the end of her thumb.

"I warned him," she muttered. "Warned him what might happen if he used the fungus. But he wouldn't listen to me." She bit down harder on her thumb, drawing blood, but didn't seem to notice. "Too wrapped up in his own problems. Too concerned with his own needs. Too self-centered to concentrate on the task at hand."

Miranda halted at the edge of the pit containing the *chu-*

pacabra eggs. She stared down at the fragile shells, hugging herself to stay warm as the chill mists of the cavern swirled around her. Miranda considered shifting back to her true *chupacabra* body—it could certainly handle lower temperatures better. But after spending the past hundred years on and off as Miranda Silva, the shaman had come to enjoy her times as a human. The skin was almost comforting.

Miranda sighed. The initial bloodlust she had felt while procuring the codices had been replaced with bouts of depression. Despite her best efforts, she had been unable to convince Curt Connors of the dangers involved in using the fungus. Once it was clear that he wouldn't back down, she could only give in to his demands and hope for the best. Her people's future had depended on Connors coming to terms with what he was.

But Connors' vision quest had gone wrong, and the Lizard had apparently eliminated the scientist instead of bonding with him. And though Connors' notes on the egg tests would help her in the ceremony, Miranda was not the scientist Connors had been.

The Great Awakening was now in jeopardy.

"Blast you, Connors," Miranda whispered. She shook her head, saddened. They had come so close, only to have everything threatened by the petty needs of one human.

And what of the Lizard, now that Connors was gone?

Miranda knew she would have to deal with the Lizard eventually. If it weren't so obsessed with death and destruction, it could truly be their messiah.

But where was the reptile king, with the Great Awakening only a few hours away? Out searching for innocent humans to sacrifice to its bloodlust, while inciting her people to make war.

In the beginning, Miranda had encouraged the Lizard's aggression, because her people needed decisive action to steal the codices. But once the eggs were hatched, they wouldn't need the Lizard anymore, unless they wanted to die in a pointless war with the humans. Some of the *chupacabras* were fighters, such as the hand-picked crew she had taken to New

York and Paris, but most of them were shy, retiring creatures, more likely to avoid trouble than start it.

On the other hand, humans were ruthless, little changed from the conquistadors who had destroyed the native cultures and forced the *chupacabras* into hiding. The humans now had almost limitless supplies of weapons—they wouldn't hesitate to wipe out a remote Mexican region where hardly anyone lived.

Soon there would be close to a million more *chupacabras*, and it would be harder than ever to keep their existence a secret. Her people would have to reveal themselves to the humans and seek peace. Despite the inspirational value of the Lizard, Miranda realized she would have to find some way to neutralize it.

Perhaps she had been too hasty in welcoming the departure of Curt Connors in favor of the Lizard. True, the human had needlessly killed several embryos, but he had also saved her days or weeks of precious work. His talents and experience were exactly what she needed for tonight's work, while the Lizard's main contributions were over. Without Connors, Miranda would have to fall back on ancient rituals and arcane spells.

A dark figure suddenly rose out of the shadows and gripped Miranda's shoulders. She gasped.

The Lizard towered over her and growled, "Your people are cowards. They *ran* from the humans!"

"I never claimed they were fierce fighters," answered Miranda. "They've spent hundreds of years fleeing from humans." She glanced down at her watch. "They also don't do very well in daylight—their eyes are too sensitive."

The monster glared at her with reddened, slitted eyes. "And why do you keep this offensive shape—the shape of a *mammal*?"

"Human fingers are more dexterous than my claws," she answered, "and Connors' equipment is all made for human hands. I can't afford to make a mistake, not with a million lives hanging in the balance."

"A million *warriors,*" replied the Lizard with satisfaction. It grabbed her by the hair and savagely pulled her head back. "Do not fail me, shaman. I have great plans in mind for my army. Should the hatchlings expire, you will die as surely as any mammal that has ever crossed me."

Miranda tried to twist out of its painful grasp, but the monster's strength was enormous. "My lord, there is no reason to be disagreeable. We are almost at our goal—nothing can stop us now."

The Lizard grunted and released her. "Spider-Man is here," it rasped.

"Spider-Man?" Miranda asked in shock. That was unexpected. The Lizard was definitely getting to be a liability if it was attracting enemies to their secret haunts. The last thing she needed was some American super hero interfering with the Great Awakening.

"How did he know to come to Mexico?" she demanded.

"I do not know." The Lizard strode back and forth across the chamber, clenching and unclenching its scaly hands.

"You'll have to kill him," she said.

"I already *did!*" snarled the Lizard.

Miranda stared at the monster in confusion. "Then why do you seem so worried?"

"Because that particular mammal has an annoying habit of surviving."

Miranda folded her arms across her chest and coolly stared at her leader. "And if he *does* still live?"

"Then I will kill him again!" the Lizard roared. "As many times as it takes until he is dead for good!"

"But the ritual of the Great Awakening must take place tonight, before dawn," Miranda said. "We can't let anything stop it!"

"I will handle the situation," the Lizard replied. "But your people are useless in combat. They are weak, ineffectual. I need crocodiles, alligators, monitors, pythons, cobras—*good* fighters!"

"Look in the bogs, my lord," suggested Miranda. "There

are many reptiles out there, stronger ones than us." She might have added that she had more important things to do, but she didn't want to antagonize the Lizard until she figured out a way to get rid of it.

Now that Miranda was so close to achieving her goal, she realized that keeping a deranged, unpredictable monster was a luxury she couldn't afford. If only there was some way to revive Connors' submerged personality . . .

The Lizard charged off toward the muddy river bed, seeking new recruits for its army of death.

Miranda frowned. If Spider-Man was coming, she could only hope that her followers would be able to intercept and delay him long enough for her to complete the ritual. In that batch of a million new beings, there was bound to be at least one queen. With one queen, Miranda could ensure the longevity of their species for another thousand years.

The shaman would let nothing stand in the way of the Great Awakening.

Swinging from malformed trees and bizarre rock formations, Spider-Man plunged deeper into a narrow, twisting canyon. With its three-thousand-foot drops, nasty thickets and cacti, and slimy river bed, Spidey couldn't imagine a more foreboding place on the whole planet. Although there were some New York alleys that were just as bad . . .

Now that Spidey had reached Valle del Lagarto—this gash in the Earth had to be the place—he decided to save his webbing and scuttle along the walls. Considering the fact that he was heading into the middle of enemy territory, he needed every defensive measure he could use in order to just stay alive. He also had to make sure he saved enough webbing to get back to the village and retrieve his belongings. Otherwise, it would be an awfully long walk, and that didn't even count time for getting lost.

Spidey paused to rest on an outcropping. He winced as his cracked ribs reminded him of his delicate condition.

Gonna have to wrap this up as quickly as possible, he

thought. *With all these cuts and injuries, it won't be long before I have to start dealing with the inevitability of infection. And the last thing I need is to develop gangrene out in the middle of nowhere.*

The wall-crawler stared at his surroundings. "Okay, Liz, which way'd you go?"

Oddly enough, the tingle from his spider-tracer was constant, not getting any stronger. It seemed as if the Lizard was dead ahead but still moving away from him. Spider-Man set off once more, traversing the vertical landscape, trying to avoid the stunted trees and spiny plants that found some foothold on the canyon walls.

A few drops of water struck his back, and he realized that it was raining. Spidey looked up to see marble-streaked clouds roiling ominously across the sky.

The rain quickly picked up in intensity. In seconds, the web-slinger was soaked to the bone.

"Great," he muttered. "I'm not bad off enough with my injuries. Now I'm gonna catch pneumonia." He began looking around for shelter.

A buzz from his spider-sense made the hero dive to one side just as two shadows swerved at him from out of the driving rain. Grimacing under his mask as he felt a twinge from his ribs, Spidey barely had time to shoot a web at a nearby rock ledge and swing to safety before his attackers doubled back.

Looks like a bunch of Lizzy's soldiers couldn't make it to safety before the sun came up and hid in the jungle, Spidey thought. *But now that it's dark again, they're eager to pick up where they left off . . . namely, trying to kill any humans in the vicinity.*

His spider-sense tingled strongly, and he looked up. Two *chupacabras* dropped from the sky, clinging to his back and trying to gnaw on his neck. Spider-Man leaped from his perch, reeling out a web-line as he fell. His attackers held on to him, giving no indication of flying off. At a precise moment, the wall-crawler snapped the line taut, bouncing like a bungee

jumper and sending the two gargoyles smashing into the ground, twenty feet below.

As Spidey went rappelling upward, more of the creatures came swooping toward him. He batted and kicked them away, but three of the screeching harpies latched on to him, and their combined weight snapped his web-strand. They plummeted to the ground in a mass of flailing claws, wings, and fists.

Spidey twisted one of his foes around, letting it take the brunt of the fall as they smacked the ground, but there was no relief from the winged hellions. Four more pounced on him and drove him into the mud and rocks.

"You boys have *got* to work on your manners," grumbled Spidey. "This is no way to treat a tourist."

He turned into a whirlwind of flying fists and feet—well, one flying fist and feet, since his left hand was useless in a fight—knocking his four attackers off. Three more dive-bombed him from the sky. Their talons and fangs ripped into him with a frenzy he hadn't encountered when he faced them in Manhattan, and their chirping was incessant. It was as if they were fighting for their lives or protecting their homeland.

"Guys! Guys!" snapped Spidey, punching and brawling his way through them. "I know you're trying to impress your boss, but you're getting a little carried away!"

Escape was not only looking like a good idea but a necessary one. There was no sense taking to the air, as they could fly faster than he could swing, so Spidey took off at a dead run along the ground. The footing was treacherous in the dark and the rain, but still he leaped over streams and boulders like a gazelle, heading in the direction of the spider-tracer.

The mad dash seemed to work for a while, but a chittering sound from the vegetation ahead made it clear to Spidey that he had been outflanked. They had flown ahead to cut him off!

He lost his balance, landed on his rump, and slid across a damp rock, which turned out to be the perfect maneuver. Avoiding the creatures' claws and wings, Spider-Man crashed into their front line, knocking their legs out from under them.

He was then able to crawl out from under the pile of spindly limbs and keep running.

This isn't *going as well as I'd hoped,* Spidey thought. He groaned, suddenly lightheaded, and stumbled. *Head feels like it's about to split open. Better a killer headache than getting my blood sucked, though.* He ran on, barely able to keep his balance.

If these goatsuckers plan on chasing me until I drop, they're on the right track. I'm about worn down to a nub, and I haven't even found the Lizard yet.

As if he didn't have enough problems, the rainfall became torrential. For a split-second, the valley was bathed in white light, as a bolt of lightning singed the humid air. Spidey could see dozens of *chupacabras* in the air, and scores more in the surrounding vegetation. There were probably hundreds of them, all intent on killing the colorful intruder.

Welcome to Valle del Lagarto, Spidey thought grimly.

The wall-crawler dashed between squads of *chupacabras* as they wildly grabbed for him. He rolled and feinted and dodged, occasionally scanning the cliffs for a cave entrance. He couldn't fight hordes of the creatures out in the open, but he could defend the mouth of a cave, like Horatio at the bridge.

Gotta get higher if I'm gonna find some protection, Spidey thought. He shot a web at a jagged overhang and hauled himself skyward. At once a flock of *chupacabras* closed in on him, and he swooped toward the cliff and landed on all fours. He scurried as fast as he could, trying to find a hole, a crevice—some kind of place to make a stand! The grotesqueries flapped and clawed at him, trying to knock him off the cliff face, but Spidey just kept moving, parrying their attacks as best he could.

Finally he saw a dark pockmark in the rock just below him—it was about the size of a manhole. He leaped off his perch, kicked two *chupacabras* out of the way, and swung himself into the hole.

These guys sure are tenacious, Spidey thought. *I wonder*

what the Lizard's been telling them to get them so riled up over humans . . .

There was hardly enough room in the small cavity to scrunch down and get all of himself inside, but at least his back was protected. The flying demons circled and hovered in front of the opening, squawking in anger. They were just itching to rip into him, but he could fend them off with one hand from his cozy hiding place.

Unfortunately, this meant Spidey was stuck in a hole in the wall until the creatures decided to leave, which didn't appear to be any time soon. If anything, more of the hideous creatures were joining the fun, anxiously awaiting an opportunity to rip into him.

Okay, hero, Spider-Man thought, *now what?* He rubbed his jaw. *If the storm broke, would they go away? As determined and angry as they are, probably not. And the longer they keep me holed up in here, the farther away the Lizard is getting.*

Well, what if I retreated? Assuming they're protecting the Lizard, if I ran the other way and pretended to leave, would they break off their attack? Once I've put some distance between us, I could double back from some other direction and keep going after the Lizard. A retreat might show them I wasn't being aggressive, and they might respond in kind. The wall-crawler shrugged. *Anyway, it's worth a try.*

Taking a deep breath, Spidey leaped out of his humble shelter, soared through the driving rain, and landed in the mud. "It's been fun," he shouted, "but I'm going home! Bye, guys! Next time you're in New York, look me up. We'll do lunch!"

He took off across the bottom of the canyon, headed southeast back toward the Indian village. He glanced over his shoulder, hoping to see nothing but the creatures headed in the opposite direction. Instead, his spider-sense screamed as he saw a massive formation of *chupacabras* bearing down on him, flapping their wings for all they were worth.

This is really *getting to be tiresome,* thought Spider-Man. He whirled around and slugged the first flyer to zoom in, then rolled to dodge three more. But half-a-dozen others changed

course to intercept him, while more of them massed in the sky. The chase was on again!

Spider-Man slogged and slugged his way through the gauntlet again, not even sure in what direction he was headed. It was all he could do to keep his rabid attackers from latching onto him and dragging him to the ground. As long as he kept moving, he still had a chance, although escape appeared impossible. The goatsuckers had the numbers, skill, and determination to pursue him for miles as he fled across these unforgiving mountains, and he couldn't fight all of them. Eventually, he would tire, and then the gargoyles would move in for the kill.

Making use of his remaining web-shooter, Spider-Man swung a mile deeper into the narrow canyon before the swarm of *chupacabras* caught up with him. Relentlessly, they dove at him like kingfishers diving after fish, trying to force him to the ground.

Spidey searched the cliffs for another cave in which to hide. While he was doing so, he saw something even more remarkable in the distance—a human, carrying a lantern!

Could it be Curt Connors? Spider-Man thought. The figure was clad in a loose-fitting cloak, the hood pulled forward to keep out the driving rain. It almost made it impossible to know who was underneath the dark material. *Could be Doctor Octopus under there for all I know. Oh, well, any port in a storm . . . literally.* Spider-Man propelled himself through the dense foliage, trying to reach the light which glimmered in the pounding rain.

As he neared the mysterious figure, the web-slinger's spider-sense buzzed a warning. He slowed down. The cloaked figure reached up to pull back its hood.

"Miranda Silva," Spidey said. "Why am I not surprised?"

"So, the Lizard was right," Miranda commented. "You *are* difficult to kill."

"I wouldn't be much of a card-carrying super hero if I *wasn't*," Spidey replied. The jungle behind him came alive with the sounds of his pursuers closing in. The wall-crawler

saw that the creatures were still some distance away, then turned back to Miranda. "You know, lady, since you've made it clear that those flying monkeys obey your every command, I'm sure they'd be willing to back off if they thought you were in some kind of danger from the big, bad spider."

Raising his right hand, Spider-Man shot out a web-line to ensnare Miranda. But the shaman was not so easily caught. Moving with lightning speed, she avoided the snare and ducked under some vines, seemingly disappearing into the rock behind her.

A cave! thought Spidey. *Well, she's not gonna lose me that easily!* With giant strides, he bounded across the last thirty yards and dove under the vines.

Spider-Man found himself in a dark, narrow passageway. He could see a light bobbing somewhere ahead of him—Miranda and her lantern. The bobbing light disappeared around a bend, and Spidey rushed after it.

His spider-sense was blaring away, warning of danger all around him, but the hero pressed on. Following Miranda might lead him to the Lizard . . . or some deadly hidden trap. But the risk was worth it if he could get Curt Connors out of this madhouse.

As Spidey stepped from the passageway into the central cavern, he came to a halt, momentarily awed by the sight before him. Dim shafts of light were filtering through holes in the craggy ceiling, giving the cave the appearance of some sort of primeval cathedral. Stalactites and stalagmites gleamed like half-melted statues

A movement in the shadows on the far side of the cavern caught Spider-Man's eye. Faint lantern light flitted between the creamy columns of mineral deposits. As much as he would have liked to gawk at these incredible sights, his new guide was getting away from him, and he had to follow.

"Stop!" Spider-Man called after Miranda, and his voice reverberated in the massive chamber like a shotgun blast. The light was swallowed up by another dark passageway, and unseen wings fluttered above his head, their owners awakened

by his shout. With leaps and bounds, the web-spinner dashed to the far wall and slipped into the crevice where Miranda had vanished.

As Spider-Man plunged down the twisting corridor, the flickering light weaved in and out of the darkness ahead of him.

Chasing this woman through a bunch of caves crawling with chupacabras *just might turn out to be the smartest thing I've ever done . . . or the* dumbest, Spidey thought. *I hope I live long enough to find out which it is.*

At long last, his mad chase was over, and he emerged in another cavern—just as the light blinked off, plunging everything into darkness.

I think I have my answer, thought Spidey. Definitely *the dumbest thing I've ever done.*

"Hey, Miranda, this Blind Man's Bluff game is fun," Spidey called out to the darkness. "But how are you at Twister?"

"Extremely double-jointed," answered a sultry voice with a Spanish accent. "It's one of my more . . . popular abilities." Her voice seemed to come from everywhere, making it impossible to figure out her location. Even his spider-sense couldn't pinpoint her whereabouts.

"Really?" Spidey replied, matter-of-factly. "Well, why don't you turn on your lantern and we'll play a few rounds?"

"Oh, I'm afraid the batteries have burned out," Miranda responded playfully. "But we can still have some fun in the dark."

"Is that why you lured me here?" asked Spidey. "To show me your etchings—I mean, your pre-Columbian art? I have to warn you—I'm not that kind of guy."

"How sad," Miranda said. She paused. "So, tell me, Spider-Man—how did you find us?"

"The Lizard leaves a slimy trail," Spidey remarked sarcastically. "Look, why are you hooked up with iguana-breath, anyway? Your *chupacabras* have a perfect home here—nobody would ever bother them. Why attack humans? And how do *you* figure into all of this?"

"My reasons are my own," she answered. "I doubt you would understand."

"What—that you take pleasure in killing innocent people?" Spider-Man said sharply. "The way your friends live, they don't need money. Neither do you, and neither does the Lizard. There was no reason to kill those art collectors back in New York. Something's going on here, and I doubt it has anything to do with your admiration for pre-Columbian art."

"What do you know about Curt Connors?" asked the voice in the darkness. Clearly, Miranda was seeking to change the subject.

Spider-Man took a hesitant step forward, trying to locate his quarry. "You tell me."

"I know that he and Curt Connors are the same being, although the Lizard does not seem to know this. Is Curt Connors the dominant being?"

Spidey stepped forward, hoping that they may have found something in common—a mutual respect for the bedeviled scientist.

"Curt Connors is the real thing," he answered. "He's a good man, and he deserves our help. I don't know what you're getting by hanging out with the Lizard, but it's not something I'd recommend. It has a rotten temper."

"You can't kill it, can you?" she asked.

"I'm not a killer, lady—for any reason. I'm here because I only have the Doc's best interests at heart. I want to try and cure him—take him home to his family. Will you help me?"

"I can't," Miranda responded. "Curt Connors is dead. Only the Lizard remains."

"*What?!*" Spider-Man exclaimed.

"And if you can't bring yourself to kill the Lizard, then you're of no use to me." Miranda's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I wish it could be otherwise."

The woman made a little chirping sound, a signal to someone . . . or some*thing* in the darkness.

As his spider-sense screamed with alarm, the web-slinger felt claws at his back, shoving him forward. He stumbled in

the darkness, fighting to regain his balance—but it was too late! He fell forward, expecting to hit the cold stone floor.

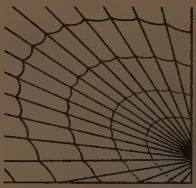
Instead, he dove headfirst into cool nothingness.

"Not again!" groaned the wall-crawler.

As he tumbled, Spidey shot out a web to try to stop his fall. The line fluttered uselessly in the air, snagging nothing.

A jagged outcropping caught Spider-Man on the temple. As consciousness drained away, the insensate hero plunged down . . . down . . . into the bottomless pit.

CHAPTER 14



Miranda turned on her lantern and motioned to two of her attendants. "Fly down into the pit and make sure he's dead."

The *chupacabras* stepped to the edge of the pit and leaped off, fluttering their wings gently in the chute. The pit was wide enough at the top to accomodate both of the flyers, but Miranda knew that about a thousand feet down, it narrowed to the point where they could fly no further. If Spider-Man's body wasn't found by then, he had fallen all the way to the bottom, however far down that might be.

Miranda paced impatiently, her thoughts in turmoil. Spider-Man was just one of countless superpowered beings living in New York. If he was dogged enough to pursue the Lizard to this remote Mexican valley, he might have told other heroes of his intentions. What if, at this very moment, the Avengers or the Fantastic Four were on their way to join him?

Miranda nervously chewed on the knuckles of one hand. It was all going terribly wrong. She had been a fool to count on the Lizard! The monster was so obsessed with its plans to destroy mankind that it had ignored the possibility—no, the *inevitability*—that the super hero community would take action against it. At any time, the caves might soon be filled with colorfully garbed men and women, all of them intent on stopping the ritual.

The ritual!

Miranda still needed to make the final preparations. Fortunately, she had helpers. A hundred of her people had been training for centuries on hen's eggs, practicing how to rapidly pierce their own eggs during the Great Awakening. Fifty more as nursemaids to the young, and the rest as food-gatherers. Everyone knew their tasks and were devoted to the cause. Miranda and her people had fought and survived long and hard for this night—it hardly seemed possible for the end to be in sight.

In the wonderful wave of children, there *would* be a

queen—Miranda could feel it! They would nurture the queen to radiant health, and she would live hundreds of years, filling the caverns with eggs. With the formula restored, their race would have a fighting chance for survival, equal to the humans and other species.

As for the Lizard . . .

Miranda had to find some way to turn it human again. Then in the monster's weakened state, she would kill him. The Lizard would not prevent her from seeking peace with the humans, and Connors would not reveal their secrets. Neither one of them would leave Valle del Lagarto.

Miranda heard the fluttering of wings, and she turned to see her two assistants rising from the pit. They landed at her side and, in their chittering language, informed her that Spider-Man was nowhere to be seen—he must have plunged to the bottom.

"Continue with the preparations," Miranda told them. "I must return to the hatchery." Lantern in hand, she swept out of the chamber and into the passageway.

Moments later, she strode through the central chamber and into another corridor, still thinking about all the preparations she had to make. Her mind was full of formulas and incantations, which she had only recently learned. Reciting them in her head, she walked into the smaller cavern which served as the hatchery—only now it looked more like a laboratory.

In addition to the shallow pit, which was full of eggs resting in a glowing mist, there were racks of beakers, burners, test tubes, and various pieces of lab apparatus.

A hulking figure strode from the shadows on the far side of the chamber. The Lizard was shaking with rage, clenching and unclenching its long claws.

"Where have you been?" it demanded.

"I was overseeing an important matter," Miranda responded calmly. "Putting an end to Spider-Man."

The Lizard squinted at her. "So, he *did* survive. He is very resourceful . . . for a mammal."

"As you predicted, my lord. My forces chased him into the

cavern with the great pit and pushed him in. He will trouble us no more."

The Lizard roared with rage, causing the beakers and test tubes to shake noisily.

"What is wrong?" asked Miranda.

"I was cheated of killing Spider-Man!" the Lizard snapped. "Where is his body?"

"You can't get to his body—no one has ever seen the bottom of that pit. But I sent two of my best flyers down there, and they went over a thousand feet deep. Spider-Man is gone."

"He has survived one fall already," the Lizard rasped. "He could very well survive another. Without a body, there is no guarantee that he has been eliminated."

"I . . ." Miranda began, then stopped. Could it be true? Could one man be *that* difficult to kill?

Miranda shook her head. No. Spider-Man was dead. The Lizard was wrong . . . it *had* to be.

The Lizard stalked around the pit, its tail perilously close to wiping out a table full of microscope slides and measuring cups. "I hate all these human objects and glass tubes—they remind me of Connors! And I hate *you* when you insist on looking like a mammal!"

Miranda put down the lantern and tried to slip into the shadows, so the Lizard wouldn't fixate on her appearance. "I will change back to my true form as soon as the preparations are complete and we are ready to begin. It was humans who performed these tasks for us in the days before the Spaniards. Since there are no humans avaliable, *I* must take their place in the ritual."

"Humans!" roared the Lizard, slapping its tail on the rocky floor of the cave. Miranda flinched. "You have no stomach for killing them. You *are* human."

Miranda froze, fighting to control her anger. There was some truth in what the Lizard said. As a *chupacabra*, she felt drawn to the magnetism of the Lizard. But in her human form,

she could see the Lizard for what it was—a chaotic, selfish monster.

She had to be careful of her actions and words. Not only was the Lizard unpredictable, but many of her people saw him as the messiah of the prophecies. It was a dangerous position for the shaman to be in, but Miranda knew the risks to her people were greater. Following the Lizard would only lead them down the path to extinction. When the eggs were hatched and she had dispensed with the Lizard, Miranda would tell her people the truth about the mammal-hating monster.

"My lord," she said softly, trying to sound subservient. "This is not the time or the place to discuss *me,* not when the most crucial step is at hand."

Miranda pointed to the natural rock cauldron oozing greenish, phosphorescent mist. "There they are, a million of your followers, ready to fly with you to glory. Be patient only a little while longer, my master. We have worked so hard for this moment."

The Lizard snorted. "When will these soldiers be large enough to fight?"

Miranda looked away, not wanting to tell him the truth—long-lived *chupacabras* took fifty years to mature. Even then, only a handful would ever be decent warriors.

"Soon enough," she said. "Please, my lord, why don't you rest? I have a few more hours of work to do to prepare enough of the catalyst and nutrients. I will call you when it's time."

The Lizard growled and slunk off into a dark corner. "Carry on with your *human* work. I will sit here and watch. But when you finish, I *will* have my warriors."

"As you wish, master," intoned Miranda.

Spider-Man awoke with a headache that stretched from his hair follicles all the way down to his toenails. He could still move his fingers and toes, so he knew his back wasn't broken—it just felt that way. Only his remarkable physiology had saved him from serious harm. That, and this ledge he was lying on. He tried not to move, because it was completely dark

and he didn't know how wide the ledge was. Spidey could tell from a strong upward draft that he wasn't at the bottom of the pit, not by a long shot.

He remembered shooting a web that had missed, then shooting another one that had stuck and slowed his fall. But it had also sent him banging back and forth between the walls of the pit like a clapper in a bell. That was when he had lost consciousness and fallen the rest of the way, however far that had been.

Spidey looked up. If there was a light above him, he sure couldn't see it. He had no idea how long he had been out—it might have been days, but was probably only hours. In this hole in the earth, there was no sense of time.

Note to self, Spidey thought. *Stop wading into places where you're outnumbered by about a gazillion to one. Unless, of course, you're able to pay for the medical bills . . . which you're not.*

Slowly, Spidey unfolded his bruised and battered body, trying to ignore the ache in his head and the stabbing pain in his ribcage. With shaky hands, he latched onto the slimy, uneven walls of the pit. His muscles protested as he hauled himself upward through the darkness.

After a few minutes, he crawled over a jutting lip of rock and found that the pit had widened considerably.

Still doesn't tell me how far I've fallen, though. For all I know, I was down far enough to say "hi" to the Mole Man in Subterrania.

Sighing deeply, the web-slinger continued his ascent, waiting for the slightest tingle from his spider-sense. Somewhere above him was an army of nightmarish creatures out for his blood.

And the monster who led them.

Night had fallen hours before, and still the rain fell.

The headlights of a vehicle came bouncing through the driving rain, and a flash of lightning revealed the boxy beige shape of an International Travelall. It sloshed along, swerving toward

the high ground, crunching through a thicket of nettles. The engine of the four-by-four roared mightily, but its creaking shock absorbers wailed even louder. Windshield wipers swiped at the water on the glass with minimal success, and the headlights bounced off massive boulders and twisted cacti.

Nervously gnawing on his moustache, Paco drove like a man possessed. Beside him, the young goatherd hung onto her metal seat with white-knuckled fists.

"*Aqui! Aqui!*" she shouted.

Paco screeched to a stop, the Travelall's front tires shooting up a wall of mud. The burly guide drove the vehicle onto the highest stretch of ground he could find and left it idling. He peered into the rain-streaked darkness, unable to see more than a few feet ahead.

"Are you sure this is Valle del Lagarto?" Paco asked the woman in Spanish. "How can you know for sure?"

Clutching her shawl around her head, the woman—Paco had learned her name was Milagros—slid to the window and pointed upward. Paco leaned in that direction but could see only the condensation of their breath on the window.

With a scowl, he opened his door and jumped out. Shielding his eyes against the rain, he gazed into the sky.

"*Madre de Dios!*" he cried, startled.

A massive shape hovered overhead, outlined against the rain; it suddenly zoomed toward him. Paco dove back into the truck just as the creature pounced on the hood. The Travelall rocked under the additional weight.

Paco and the woman screamed in unison. He crossed himself as the *chupacabra* hissed at them; then it pumped its wings and lifted into the sky.

Both humans panted for a few moments from the shock, then Milagros looked quizzically at Paco, as if to say, "Now what?"

"We're staying right here," declared Paco. He pounded the bare metal over his head. "We'll be safe in here—this truck is made by the people who make tractors! It'll be daylight in

a few hours, then I'll drive into Valle del Lagarto and go looking for the *gringo*."

"You're certain he is there?" Milagros asked in Spanish.

"Sure, I'm sure! I didn't find his body anywhere near the village, or even at the bottom of the trail. I figure the *chupacabras* must've grabbed him and taken him out here. And I'm not leaving here until I get him back from those monsters!"

Milagros looked admiringly at him. "Because he is such a good friend?"

"No! Because he owes me *fifty dollars!*" Paco shot back. He folded his arms stubbornly. "The *gringo* owes me that money fair an' square for everything I've done for him already. Besides, I need to pay your people for pushing my truck out." He snarled softly. "Stupid tourists! Why do they have to come down here and start looking for trouble? *Chupacabras*—hah!"

Milagros smiled. It was clear that Paco was genuinely concerned about the handsome *gringo*. But if the guide wanted to pretend he was only interested in the money, who was she to argue?

The young goatherd folded her arms, trying to emulate Paco's tough manner, but she kept glancing worriedly out the window at the sky.

Reluctantly, Paco reached for the ignition and turned off the engine. "No sense in keeping it running. 'Sides, the *last* thing I need is running out of gas out here."

Now the only noise was the insistent rain beating on the roof. When a crack of thunder erupted, Paco jumped, expecting to see more *things* pouncing at them from the darkness. But there was only rain and thunder, at least for the moment.

Paco reached under his seat and pulled out a crowbar. He slapped it nervously against his palm as he surveyed the dismal sky.

Only a few more hours until daylight, he thought. *We can make it 'til then. Hang on,* gringo. *The cavalry's on the way . . .*

• • •

The darkness was starting to get to him.

Hampered by a pounding headache and a sore body, his every sense alert for the attack he was certain was coming, it was difficult at times for Spider-Man to not imagine the horrific creatures that were probably waiting for him just beyond the edge of the pit. His heart leaped in his chest at the slightest sound, though most of the noise was created by his own hands and feet as they sought purchase on the rough stone surface.

I really, really *hate this,* the web-spinner thought. *I'm deep underground, I can't see two feet in front of me, and there doesn't seem to be any end to this pit. It's almost like the time when—*

His mind flashed on an image: Lying on his back, hands scrabbling in the darkness, encountering a hard wooden surface inches from his face. He was in a box.

No! A coffin!

I'm buried alive!

His ears filled with sounds: flesh thumping against wood; short, ragged breaths; cries of indignation and fear. *His* cries. *His* fear.

Knuckles cracking as they finally succeeded in splintering the wood. Dirt cascading onto his face. Covering his mouth, his nostrils.

Can't breathe! I'm suffocating!

Frantically clawing at the clammy soil.

Mary Jane . . . ?

Pushing it aside, ignoring its cool embrace.

Mary Jane!

Forcing his legs to move, to piston his body upward.

I can't die now! Can't lose you like this!

Forcing his arms up, up until they met no further resistance.

Mary Jane . . . I love you!

Pulling himself up through the darkness. Gasping for the sweet, sweet air as his head broke the surface. Rain splashing on his face. Eyesight momentarily lost in the white-hot flash

of lightning above him. Teeth chattering from the boom of thunder exploding seconds later.

Alive! I'm—

"—alive!" Spider-Man roared. His cry echoed throughout the chamber above him. In the distant passages of the cavern, a slight chittering noise arose, as though in response.

Spider-Man gasped at the sound of his own voice. Was that *fear* he heard in its tone? He shook his head to clear it.

Not good, Parker. Dwelling on old psychic scars isn't going to do you a bit of good . . . especially in this *place.* He tried to suppress a shudder, failed. *Just because this deep, dark pit reminds you of the time when Kraven the Hunter drugged you, buried you alive, and took your place for* two whole weeks—he shook, violently this time—*is no reason to act like you're in the same predicament. You can move around here, there are no walls to close in on you, and Kraven is long dead. Killed by his own hand.*

I just wish this place wasn't so blasted dark . . .

Spider-Man strained to see what lay ahead in the chamber above, but he might as well have been wearing a blindfold—the blackness was total.

"A torch! A torch! My kingdom for a torch!" Spidey muttered. With a sigh, he continued climbing.

Minutes later, his fingers crept over the edge onto level stone. His heart skipped a beat. Spider-Man paused, waiting for his spider-sense to warn him of danger. There wasn't even a mild buzz. He was alone in the chamber.

"Top floor!" Spidey whispered. "Gargoyle monsters! Beautiful women! Ugly reptile-men in raggedy lab coats! Everybody out!"

Spider-Man hauled himself over the lip of the hole and kneeled on the cool floor. "I will *never* make fun of spelunkers again . . . even if the word does sound kind'a dirty."

Staggering to his feet, the web-slinger turned in a slow circle, careful to avoid the edge of the pit. There was a mild

tingle from his spider-sense now, but it wasn't a warning—more like the kind of buzz he got from—

The spider-tracer! Behind his mask, Spider-Man smiled slyly. *Hate to disappoint you, Liz, but I think it's about time we had that little man-to-reptile talk I've been meaning to have with you. And then maybe I'll find out what all this craziness has been about . . .*

Grimly determined, Spider-Man set off in the direction of the tracer signal.

It was time.

In a small chamber, down a short passageway from the egg pit, Miranda Silva was making the final preparations for the revivification ceremony. By studying Connors as he worked on the special potions and taking up where his research had left off, Miranda had been able to create a batch of the serum that, she prayed, would be successful. The shaman had to admit—for an infuriatingly weak human, Connors had been a gifted scientist. All that was needed now was the performance of the actual ceremony.

Sitting in a battered camp chair, dark eyes flashing in the light of a hurricane lamp, Miranda scanned the codex pages that lay scattered across an army-issue cot. It had taken months to assemble the delicate pages—the original codex had been dismantled more than a hundred years ago, its contents sold to collectors around the globe. In her human guise, the *chupacabra* shaman had used her contacts in the art world to track down the current collectors and learn the whereabouts of the pages. Then, with the help of the Lizard and a few of her followers, Miranda had traveled from Mexico to Europe, from Africa to Asia, and finally to the United States. More often than not, the pages were acquired through violent means. No more than a handful of the unfortunate collectors had survived their encounters with the Lizard and its beautiful female companion.

Miranda grimaced at the memories of what she had done. She remembered the horrified looks on the collectors' faces as

they were confronted by a group of nightmarish creatures; the bloodlust filling her every thought; her heart beating faster as she hunted down her prey; the taste of blood in her mouth, trickling warmly down her throat. Having lived on the fluids of animals all her life, she had come to develop—she was now ashamed to admit—a taste for human blood. It was hot and sweet, tangy with the spice of fear, and it charged every fiber of her being with an energy she had never before felt.

It had been intoxicating.

Miranda shook her head despondently. Her dedication to her people and their cause had reached a fever pitch under the Lizard's influence, and she had reveled in the loss of control.

The Lizard's influence had to be ended before the monster led her people to their doom.

Miranda rubbed bleary eyes with delicate fingertips, then paused to look at her hands—human hands, not the gnarled claws of a *chupacabra*. She looked around the chamber, glancing at the meager furnishings: a bed, a chair, a table, a lamp, and a watertight foot locker. Not exactly the type of environment in which one would expect to find a creature used to hanging upside-down from the roof of a cave.

A smile peeped up at the corners of Miranda's mouth. The Lizard might be right; maybe she was more human than *chupacabra* now. Perhaps her time among the human race had come to affect her subconsciously. After all, she *had* become quite comfortable in her Miranda Silva form, hadn't she? She owned property like a human, dressed like a human, even had a makeshift bedroom constructed in this chamber. She had human friends, ate human foods, made love with human males.

The smile slowly faded as a new, disturbing thought entered the shaman's mind: If she was changing, could there still be a place for her among her people? Or might they cast her out, exile her from the valley? Miranda shivered. To be cut off from her heritage, her people, frightened her more than any plans of conquest the Lizard might be formulating.

The sound of bare feet scuffling along the stone floor of the

passageway cut into Miranda's thoughts. She looked up to find the Lizard standing in the doorway. The monster silently glared at her, its lips pulled back in a contemptuous sneer.

Miranda rose from her chair. It was clear that the Lizard was still angered by her appearance. "My lord?" she asked.

"Why do you delay the ceremony?" the Lizard rasped.

Miranda gestured toward the codex pages. "I was merely studying the steps of the procedure one last time, my lord." She cast her gaze downward, hoping she looked sufficiently cowed. "I did not mean to upset you."

The Lizard grunted. "And have you completed your studies?"

Miranda nodded.

"Then begin, shaman." The Lizard turned and stomped away.

As the Lizard's footfalls faded into the distance, Miranda raised her head and glared at the doorway. Her eyes burned with an unnatural heat.

For now, she would follow the Lizard's commands. Upsetting the monster at such a delicate time as this might cause it to fly into a wild rage—and place the eggs in jeopardy. But when the right moment came, the Lizard *would* die.

As Miranda strode from the chamber, she wondered what the monster's blood would taste like.

Man, am I hungry.

Spider-Man grimaced as his stomach rumbled noisily. Between the periods of unconsciousness caused by his two falls and the all-pervading darkness of the cave, it was impossible for the wall-crawler to determine how long it had been since he had last eaten.

I'd sell my web-shooters right about now for a stack of those lousy taco shells that Paco had me buy, he thought as he rubbed his stomach to quiet the rattlings of his intestines. *When I get back to the States, I've* gotta *figure out some way to store food on my utility belt. Maybe get some of that freeze-*

dried stuff like the astronauts eat on space missions. His stomach burbled again.

"Down, boy," Spidey muttered. He continued walking down a passageway, following the signal from his spider-tracer. His spider-sense tingled with increasing intensity the closer he moved toward the homing device.

Shouldn't be much longer now. The way my spider-sense is buzzing away, I should be coming across ol' lizard-lips any moment—

Spider-Man froze. From just ahead could be heard a loud droning sound, similar to that of a swarm of buzzing bees. However, from the volume of the noise, it sounded like thousands upon thousands of the insects were massed just around the next turn in the passageway.

Greeaaat, thought Spidey. *Just what I needed—a swarm of killer bees waiting to sting me to death. And me without a can of Raid.*

Hugging the cave wall, Spider-Man crept forward, the tingle from his spider-sense turning into a five-alarm warning. Poking his head around the turn in the passageway, he was surprised to find the corridor devoid of insects.

But there was, literally, a light at the end of the tunnel.

"This way to the egress," Spidey said softly. Moving slowly—to give his eyes time to grow accustomed once more to light—he headed down the corridor. As he approached, the droning sound grew louder from up ahead.

Minutes later, Spider-Man reached the end of the tunnel. He stopped suddenly, weary eyes growing wide behind his mask.

"Uh-oh," he muttered.

The chamber was filled to capacity. Dozens upon dozens of *chupacabras* knelt in a rough circle around a pit, the creatures' heads bowed as though in prayer. It became clear to Spider-Man that the droning noise he had been hearing was actually the sound of the *chupacabras* chanting. The goatsuckers were too engrossed with their prayers to take notice of the colorfully garbed super hero standing nearby.

Amazing. Out of all the possibilities for an exit out of that

maze of tunnels, Spider-Man thought grimly, *I have to take the one that leads me right into the heart of Bloodsucker Central.*

Attached to the chamber walls were a ring of torches, their light casting weirdly-shaped shadows. As Spider-Man watched, transfixed, one of the shadows detached itself from a wall and dragged its hulking shape into the light.

The Lizard.

"My people!" the monster bellowed, its voice echoing off the cold stone.

Immediately, the *chupacabras* ended their chants and looked up to face their horrific messiah.

"The time has arrived, my faithful ones!" the Lizard exclaimed. "Within a few short moments, the revivification process will be completed, and a new age will arrive on this planet! The new age of the reptile!" The *chupacabras* chittered excitedly, as if in agreement.

The Lizard gestured toward the pit. "Once the eggs have hatched, a million new warriors will be born!"

Spider-Man looked at the pit around which the creatures were gathered. *Eggs? A* million *eggs, all of them containing* more *chupacabras?*

"And with their births," the Lizard continued, "we shall raise them with one goal, one sacred mission in mind: the elimination of the mammals infesting this planet!" It waved its arms high in the air. *"Death to all mammals!"*

The *chupacabras* screeched in response and leaped to their feet.

"Oh, my God," Spider-Man whispered. He stepped back into the tunnel, out of the light. *This is waaay too big for me. I've gotta get out of here, contact the Avengers or somebody.*

A movement in the darkness above him caught his attention, a split-second after his spider-sense buzzed a warning. Spider-Man turned in time to see a *chupacabra*—possibly left to stand guard—dropping from the tunnel roof, its razor-sharp claws fully extended. Unable to move aside in the confined space, Spider-Man was caught square in the chest by the crea-

ture's misshapen talons. The breath was smashed from his lungs and, dazed, he felt himself being carried through the air.

The momentum of the goatsucker's attack carried them both into the birthing chamber. Still airborne, the *chupacabra* slammed the web-slinger against a wall. The hero screamed as two of his damaged ribs finally broke. A wave of gray light washed over his senses as the gargoyle dropped him onto the stone floor. Spider-Man gasped, scrambling to pull up his mask as a wave of bile and blood spewed from his lips.

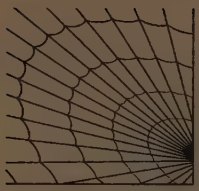
Wheezing like a broken bellows, Spider-Man struggled to his knees. Around him, hordes of *chupacabras* moved in, ready to attack.

God . . . oh, God . . . I think I'm dying . . . ribs are busted . . . spitting up blood . . . lung might be punctured . . . should've listened to Mary Jane . . . so stupid . . . never should've argued with her . . . never see her again . . . never tell her how much I really—

Shrieking madly, the *chupacabras* leaped forward, swarming over Spider-Man, bearing him down onto his back, pinning his arms and legs. The web-patterned mask was ripped from his head as claws bit into his scalp. Dozens of talons tore into his chest, his limbs. The cold stone beneath him hungrily soaked up his blood. Needle-like fangs gleamed fiercely in the torch light, then plunged into his flesh.

I'm sorry, Mary Jane . . . so sorry . . .

CHAPTER 15



"Blasted things are eating me alive!"

Paco Sandoval slapped at a mosquito that had buried its needle-like proboscis in the skin of his forearm. The insect died in a splatter of the guide's own blood; Paco brushed it away. He then began windmilling his arms to ward off a quartet of the bugs as they tried to zoom in and pick up where their fallen comrade had left off. Swarms of the annoying bloodsuckers had emerged in the hours since the rains had stopped, and the burly tour guide was hard-pressed to keep himself from being turned into a human pincushion.

Standing on a rocky ledge, Paco gazed at the lush greenery below him, then turned to face Milagros. The young goatherd was standing beside the Travelall, her face protected from the mosquitos by the thick cloth of her hood.

"You sure this is Valle del Lagartos?" Paco asked. Milagros nodded. The guide shrugged. "Don't look like much."

Climbing down from the ledge, Paco stomped back to the vehicle, slapping at his arms and neck as the mosquitos made another valiant attempt to gorge themselves on his blood. "First *chupacabras*, now bugs," he muttered. "But I don't see no lizards."

Reaching the four-by-four, Paco climbed inside the cab and motioned for Milagros to do the same. He keyed the ignition and the engine roared to life. Paco smiled broadly and patted Milagros on the knee.

"Okay, *chica*," he said. "Let's go find us a *gringo*."

With a grinding of shifting gears, the Travelall lurched forward and rumbled through the dense greenery.

I'm . . . alive . . . ?

Spider-Man moaned softly and slowly opened his eyes. His mask was gone, his surroundings no longer seen through white plastic lenses. For a moment, he panicked at the knowledge that his true identity had been revealed. But then, he realized, there was no one here who knew of Peter Parker, or was in-

terested in using that knowledge against him. He was here to die, plain and simple. In fact, he should have already been dead by now, but for some reason the creatures had stopped their attack.

The wall-crawler looked up. Around him were huddled the dark, grotesque forms of his assailants. They chittered incessantly, but made no aggressive moves, apparently awaiting orders. Spider-Man gazed at his battered body. The top half of his costume had been ripped away, leaving his utility belt and his gloves. His flesh had been sliced and gouged in dozens of places, the pinkish hue of his skin replaced by the purple, red, and black tones of bruises and welts. There were puncture wounds in his arms and legs, neck and chest. His forehead felt wet and cool, and he dimly realized that the sensation was caused by blood flowing from deep gashes in his scalp.

"You still live," hissed a voice behind him. "That is good. Very good."

A shadow fell across Spider-Man's body. He gazed up to find the Lizard standing over him, saliva dripping from its deadly jaws. The monster's tail moved back and forth like a metronome, keeping time to the Lizard's smooth, quick movements.

"*Mine* must be the hand that slays Spider-Man," rasped the king of the reptiles.

"Always . . . nice to be . . . wanted," Spider-Man weakly responded.

A scaled hand reached down to grab Spider-Man's throat. Roughly, the hero was hauled to his feet. In the web-spinner's head, suns went nova and black holes swirled before his eyes. The scrape of broken ribs rubbing together threatened to send him plummeting into the welcome embrace of darkness, but he fought to remain conscious.

Hold on, web-head, hold on. As long as you're alive, there's still a chance to find a way out of this mess. And even if there isn't, you have to at least try to stop the Lizard from carrying out its plans . . . try to give Curt Connors a chance at regaining his humanity.

Wrapping his arms around his body to steady his injured ribs, Spider-Man glared at the Lizard—who still held him by the neck—and returned the monster's hate-filled gaze.

"So, what's the hold-up, Liz?" the web-slinger said defiantly. "Thought you were in a big rush to kill me—mammals to eliminate and all that."

The Lizard's lips drew back in what could only be called an alligator's smile—toothsome, devoid of emotion, and completely frightening. "All in good time." It shoved the wall-crawler into the waiting arms of two *chupacabras*. "First, though, I—"

"Wanted to crow," Spider-Man interjected.

The Lizard moved like lightning, the back of its scaly hand striking Spider-Man across the cheek. The web-slinger grunted in pain and tried to pull free of his guards, but their grip remained firm.

"Do not interrupt me again, mammal," warned the Lizard. Spider-Man glared at the grotesque villain, but said nothing. The Lizard nodded, apparently pleased. "I wanted to make you aware that, despite your constant interference in the past, you have ultimately failed to stop me."

The Lizard swept its arms out in a grand gesture. "Look around you, Spider-Man! Here, at last, is the army I have longed to amass! Hundreds of reptilian creatures like myself, eager to do my bidding, willing to sacrifice themselves for the greater good!"

"And that would be?"

"The eradication of the mammals that have infested the Earth like a disease run unchecked." The Lizard lifted its head high and brayed, "Death to all mammals!"

The *chupacabras* shrieked in agreement.

The Lizard pointed toward the egg pit. "And in those eggs, Spider-Man, is the next generation of soldiers! A million warriors who will march forth in my name and reclaim the lands that rightfully belong to all reptiles!"

"You really think these *chupacabras* are going to sacrifice

themselves for some two-bit scaly general in a lab coat?'' Spider-Man responded.

''These creatures do not see me as a leader, mammal,'' the Lizard hissed. Its eyes burned with the light of madness. ''To them, I am their *god!*'' Stepping forward, it raised its taloned hands, preparing to strike at the web-slinger. ''And *you* will be the first blood sacrifice in my honor!''

Spider-Man weakly struggled, but there was no strength left in his limbs. He closed his eyes, waiting for the killing blow, and thought of Mary Jane.

''Stop!'' commanded a loud female voice.

Spider-Man opened his eyes. The Lizard had stopped in mid-strike and turned to face someone approaching. The figure was dressed in flowing crimson robes accented with golden embroidery at the hem; a ceremonial mask made of pure gold covered the figure's head. Spider-Man knew that there was only one woman who could be mixed up with the Lizard, no matter how odd her taste in clothing had become.

''Hey, Miranda,'' Spider-Man coughed. ''I like the robes, but isn't the mask a little flashy, even for you?''

Miranda stopped in front of him and reached up to remove her ornate mask. Her dark eyes studied Peter Parker's features. ''You're quite handsome without that ridiculous costume, Spider-Man.'' She reached out to stroke his cheek. Her skin felt wonderfully cool against his cuts and bruises. ''Quite handsome.''

Spider-Man looked down at his battered body and flashed a weak smile. ''Well . . . I *have* looked better.''

Miranda returned the smile. ''No doubt.''

The Lizard roughly grabbed her by the arm and spun her around to face him. ''Who are you to tell me to stop from killing this mammal?'' it demanded.

Miranda met its glare. ''For one hundred years, I have been the spiritual leader of my people, lord. I have kept the traditions of our ancestors, honored the tenets they established. One such tradition is the Rite of Power.''

''The Rite of—'' the Lizard spluttered. ''But I am already

your messiah. Why should I need to prove myself?''

''Because even my people recognize the fact that, if our messiah cannot vanquish his greatest enemy in combat, he is unworthy of our worship. By killing Spider-Man in a fair fight, you will gain the full support of my people, without question.''

The Lizard carefully studied Miranda, but it was impossible to read the shaman's expression. The monster nodded. ''Very well.'' It turned to the guards holding Spider-Man. ''Release him.''

The *chupacabras* did as ordered and stepped back. Spider-Man stood on shaky legs, willing himself to remain on his feet.

The Lizard moved forward. ''And now . . .''

Miranda stepped into its path, placed a delicate hand against its chest to halt it. ''No, my lord. He is wounded—barely able to stand, let alone fight. You are strong and healthy. Where is the fairness in such a match?''

The Lizard growled. ''Perhaps Spider-Man's is not the only blood I will spill today, shaman.'' It pushed Miranda toward the wall-crawler. ''Go. Fix his wounds, not that it will make a difference. The mammal will die soon enough.'' The Lizard turned and stalked off to the far side of the chamber.

Miranda placed an arm around Spider-Man's waist and led him toward her quarters. He grunted sharply as her hand came in contact with his rib cage.

''What is wrong?'' she asked, clearly concerned.

''Couple of ribs . . . I think they're broken.'' Spider-Man stumbled a few steps, but the shaman held onto him.

''I'll see what I can do about them,'' Miranda said. ''Then I'll tend to your other wounds.''

They arrived at the entrance to Miranda's makeshift bedroom. Spider-Man looked at the scant furnishings. ''Very homey,'' he commented. ''If you're into dank underground cells, that is.''

Miranda gestured toward the room. '' 'Proceed,' I said; 'herein lies the Amontillado . . . ' '' She smiled, noting Spider-Man's surprised reaction. ''Your Edgar Allan Poe is one of

my favorite authors. A gifted man. A shame that he died in such an ignoble manner." She led the wall-crawler toward the cot.

"Speaking of ignoble deaths," Spider-Man said, "why did you stop the Lizard? You weren't exactly looking out for my health back in New York."

Miranda helped the web-slinger lower himself onto the bed. He sighed softly, grateful to be off his feet.

"The circumstances have changed dramatically since New York," Miranda responded. "Had it suited my needs, I would not have intervened in your execution. But at this moment, the Lizard has become a greater danger to my people than you could ever be." She walked over to the watertight footlocker and raised its lid. "Don't think for a moment that I saved your life out of any change of heart, or that I had seen the 'error of my ways,' as the saying goes. I have need of your unique abilities—nothing more, nothing less."

"Good to know where we stand," Spidey said drily.

Miranda began rummaging through the contents of the footlocker. "You are the only one capable of stopping the Lizard, Spider-Man. The only one who can put an end to that creature . . . by whatever means are necessary."

Spider-Man shook his head. "We've already been through this, lady—I'm *not* going to kill the Lizard."

Miranda stopped pawing through the locker and glared at the web-spinner. "Even if such a decision might result in your death?"

Spider-Man returned her hard look. "Even if. There's a good man trapped inside that monster's body, Miranda—I'm not going to sacrifice him if there's a chance to save him."

Miranda hissed. "Then you are a *fool.*" The shaman turned back to her work, muttering a stream of Spanish invectives.

From the locker, she removed an oversized box made of connecting sheets of solid gold. Miranda opened its lid, looked over the box's contents, and walked over to join Spider-Man. Taking a seat beside the hero, she removed a collection of

small leather pouches and golden bowls from the box and placed the contents on the bed.

"What's this?" Spidey asked.

"The tools of my trade," Miranda said. "Do you believe in magic, Spider-Man?"

"In a young girl's heart?" Spidey quipped. His weak smile faded as he saw Miranda frown at him. "Situation a little too serious for *Name That Tune,* huh? Sorry—I couldn't resist." He glanced at the bowls and pouches, then looked back to Miranda. "Well, considering how often I've gone dimension-hopping with Doctor Strange, I like to think I keep an open mind."

Miranda nodded. "Good. You'll need it in order for my potions to work." She began measuring out the pouches' contents, placing the ingredients in the bowls.

"Potions?" Spidey asked. He frowned. "Are you expecting me to drink that stuff?"

"Most of these ingredients are for a special salve that will clean your wounds and help them heal faster," Miranda said. "But yes, one of my concoctions will have to be swallowed. Don't worry—it tastes just like chicken . . . blood."

"Wonderful," Spidey moaned. "And how do I know you're not going to poison me?"

Miranda smiled. "You'll just have to trust me, won't you?"

"Aahh!! I *never* should'a trusted you!"

Paco Sandoval kicked at a rock near his feet and swore in Spanish. Beside him, Milagros sat quietly on the hood of the Travelall and stared at the foliage around them. The four-by-four was parked in the center of a rough trail used mainly by animals. The sun had set hours ago, and the perfectly clear night sky looked like a swatch of velvet cloth in which pinholes had been poked to let light shine through.

Paco stomped around the vehicle and pointed an accusatory finger at Milagros. "You said you knew where we were going! But you *didn't,* did you? We're lost, aren't we? And now

we're gonna be stuck out here another night with those blasted *chupacabras* trying to suck our blood again!''

''We haven't seen a *chupacabra* so far tonight,'' Milagros pointed out. ''Maybe they went to attack another village.''

''Yeah, or maybe they're figurin' out what kind'a vegetables they're gonna serve us with!'' Paco grumbled. He kicked at one of the Travelall's tires. ''I *knew* we should'a stopped and asked somebody for directions!''

Milagros ignored the guide's rants, focusing her attention on the dense greenery lining the path. There was some sort of dark shape a few yards ahead. Hopping down from the car hood, the young goatherd set off to investigate.

''Hey! Where are you going?'' Paco asked, his voice rising a few octaves with fear. ''It's nighttime, *chica.* You don't wanna be wanderin' around when those goatsuckers start makin' their rounds!''

''There's something up ahead,'' Milagros replied. ''I think it's the entrance to a cave. I want to take a look.''

'' 'I want to take a look,' '' Paco mimicked in a whining tone of voice. He snorted. ''That's all that *gringo* wanted to do—look around. You see where that got *him?*''

Milagros frowned at the mustachioed guide, then continued on her way.

Paco growled. ''I *knew* comin' out here was gonna be a big mistake.'' Stomping back to the Travelall, he retrieved a baseball bat–sized flashlight—one that Milagros had brought from the village—and his trusty crowbar, then set off after the inquisitive goatherd. ''I just hope I'm gonna—''

''—live to regret this,'' said Spider-Man.

Standing in Miranda's bedroom, the web-swinger watched as Miranda crouched by his side and finished wrapping his rib cage with bandages fashioned from torn sheeting. Each strip of cloth had been soaked in one of the shaman's medicinal potions before being applied. Other bandages had been applied to his head, and splints had been fashioned for the dislocated

fingers on his left hand. The air was heavy with the scent of herbal salves.

"Don't worry," Miranda assured the hero. "As long as you protect your torso from any serious blows, you should be able to live through this battle."

"And then what?" asked Spidey. "I beat the Lizard, then you set your flying monkeys on me and I'm right back to where I started—at death's door."

Miranda stopped wrapping and looked up. "No, Spider-Man. If you can overcome the Lizard, you have my word that you will be able to leave this valley without fear of attack . . . so long as I have your word that you will never speak to anyone of what happened here." She straightened up to face him eye-to-eye. "After this day, my people and I will wish to live a quiet, uneventful life. I do not need fortune-seekers or super heroes flooding into Valle del Lagartos because you have piqued their curiosity about the existence of *chupacabras*. In addition, I promise to tell no one of the handsome face that is hidden by the gaudy mask of Spider-Man." She extended her hand. "Is it a deal?"

Spider-Man shook it. "Deal." He looked the shaman up and down, then shook his head. "I still find it kind'a hard to believe that you're a *chupacabra*."

"Thank you," Miranda replied, blushing slightly. She stepped back to look at her work. "That should do it. How does it feel?"

Spider-Man looked down at the bandages, then hesitantly took a deep breath. He slowly released it. "Feels good." He stretched, testing his muscles. They moved easily and without pain. "Real good."

Miranda nodded. "And now, the final step." Sprinkling a few ingredients into one of the golden bowls, the shaman added a thick, viscous solution from a small glass vial. Instantly, the concoction began bubbling and smoking, filling the chamber with an overpowering, metallic stench—the smell of blood. Miranda held out the bowl to Spider-Man. "Drink this."

The wall-crawler moved back a step. "Ah, I'd really rather not. You know what they say about drinking blood on an empty stomach—"

"Drink!" Miranda demanded. "Before the potion loses its strength! The salves I used to treat you will only work on your wounds. *This* will restore your strength! If you truly wish to help Connors, *this* is the only thing that will give you the power to fight the Lizard!"

Spider-Man stared at the bubbling mixture for a moment, then took the bowl. "The things I do to help my friends . . ." he muttered. Pinching his nose closed with the thumb and index finger of one hand, he quickly downed the potion.

It felt as though someone had pushed the "on" button on a generator in his body. Strange, wonderful, *alien* power raced through him, strengthening his every muscle, energizing his every nerve. His vision had never been so clear, his hearing never so acute. There was no pain, no lightheadedness, no sensation that he was about to black out—just raw energy, pulsating through every fiber of his being.

He'd never felt so invincible.

"Wow," Spider-Man whispered.

Miranda smiled. "I think you are ready."

Taking his hand, the shaman led the web-slinger back toward the birthing chamber . . . and the monster that waited.

"Where is the mammal?!" roared the Lizard. It had moved to the far side of the chamber, away from the egg pit.

"Here, my lord," replied Miranda. She and Spider-Man walked across the chamber to join it. Around them, the masses of *chupacabras* had moved away from the combat area to higher ground, perching on ledges and the roof of the cavern. A quartet of the creatures remained by the egg pit to protect the embryos from the combatants.

The Lizard glared at its old enemy. "Are you ready to die, mammal?"

"You know, Liz," said Spider-Man, "godhood certainly hasn't done anything to improve your conversational skills."

The Lizard growled, its eyes glowing a fearsome red. Then, with a bloodcurdling roar, it rushed forward, and the battle was joined.

Spider-Man easily evaded the monster's charge, leapfrogging over its head and grabbing its tail with his good hand. As Miranda ran for cover, Spider-Man swung the Lizard around in a tremendous arc, then released his hold. The Lizard soared through the air and slammed headfirst into a row of stalagmites, snapping the jagged rock formations in two.

As the monster groggily forced itself to its knees, Spider-Man landed on its back and began raining blow after blow on its head.

Gotta take him out fast, Spider-Man thought. *If I give him even a second to recover, I'll never be able to stop—*

The web-spinner's thoughts were cut short as his spider-sense jangled a warning. Before he could move, the Lizard's tail wrapped around his neck and lifted him off the monster's back. The deadly appendage flicked out, sending Spider-Man hurtling across the chamber. Only a timely web-line fired at an overhead stalactite prevented the injured hero from striking the cavern wall. Spider-Man deftly twisted his body, turning his hazardous trajectory into a graceful arc that shot him back at his reptilian enemy.

The Lizard staggered to its feet and shook its head to clear it. "Lowly mammal! I will feast on your hea—"

The monster's threat was interrupted as Spider-Man's feet slammed into its stomach, driving the air from its lungs. Together, hero and villain tumbled across the dirt-covered floor, coming to rest mere yards from one another. As the Lizard gasped for air, Spider-Man adjusted a dial on his web-shooter and fired, binding the monster's head in thick, gooey layers of the artificial adhesive. The creature's roars of outrage were quickly muffled.

If I cut off his air, get him to pass out, Spider-Man thought, *I should be able to tear off the webbing and feed him the serum. That is, if the Lizard would just be willing to go along with my plan . . .*

The Lizard tore at the web-helmet, each swipe of its claws ripping away a layer of gray goop. It would be free in seconds.

Spider-Man triggered his web-shooter again and again, covering the creature's tail and hands with binding strands. Slowly, the Lizard's struggles began to weaken, its clawed hands dropping to its sides. Apparently, the lack of air had overpowered even the king of the reptiles. With a final gasp, the Lizard toppled forward and crashed onto the stone floor.

Miranda stepped out from behind a stalagmite and moved toward the Lizard. "Is he dead?"

Spider-Man made no reply. He waved her away. "Stay back. He might be playing possum." Not heeding his own advice, the wall-crawler walked over to the fallen monster. His spider-sense buzzed a steady warning, but it wasn't a strong sensation, which meant that the Lizard was not about to attack.

Spider-Man reached to his belt and unclipped the remaining web-cartridge filled with anti-Lizard serum. "Time to take your medicine, Lizzie," he murmured.

Suddenly, his spider-sense shrieked a warning! With lightning speed, the Lizard's tail lashed out, smashing into the web-slinger's ribs and sending the serum cartridge flying into the darkness. The blow also sent Spider-Man tumbling across the rough floor. Bolts of mind-numbing pain hammered at his consciousness. He fought to stay awake, but the effort was draining what little strength he had left.

The Lizard tore away the final layers of webbing encasing its head and breathed deeply. "Mammalian fool!" it bellowed at Spider-Man. "Did you think that one such as I, accustomed to holding my breath for long periods of time underwater, could be stopped by a few sticky strands?" It ripped off the webbing that covered its hands and swaying tail, then rose to its feet.

"Get up!" Miranda shrieked at the web-spinner. "You must get up!"

Spider-Man staggered to his feet, barely hearing the shaman's cries. His senses were overloaded, every move, every breath accompanied by searing, blinding pain. His ears were filled with an ululating sound that seemed to come from every-

where. When he focused on the noise, he was surprised to discover that it was coming from his own throat—a mournful wail joined by the excited chittering of the *chupacabras* overhead.

"Now you die!" the Lizard roared. It leaped, covering the distance between them in a single bound. Purely by reflex, Spider-Man stumbled out of the reach of its claws on the first swipe, but the talons tore into his shoulder on the second pass. Blood flowed freely down his bare chest. He weakly raised his left arm to fend off a tail strike, only to have the appendage break the fingers that hadn't been dislocated in the fall from the cliff back at the village.

"No!" Miranda cried.

Picking up the pointed top of a stalagmite broken off by the Lizard's head, she charged the monster as it prepared to finish off its weakened enemy. As she ran, her body began to shimmer, then blur. Shapely arms and legs became rough, scaled appendages. Her features twisted, swirled like running water, rearranged into a hideous combination of bony projections and gnarled fangs. Leathery wings sprouted from her back.

Miranda Silva was gone.

Only the *chupacabra* she truly was remained.

The haze of pain was beginning to lift. Spider-Man jumped back as the Lizard's tail swung around, aimed at his head. The wall-crawler back pedalled, staying just out of reach of the slashing talons.

I'm about as strong as a wet dishrag right about now, he thought dimly. *Gotta find that serum cartridge, otherwise there won't be enough of this little web-spinner left to mail home for a decent funeral. If there was just some way to distract the Lizard for a few moments . . .*

As if on cue, a gargoyle-like creature leaped from the darkness, brandishing a stone club as it approached the Lizard from behind.

"Miranda . . . ?" Spider-Man murmured.

Reaching the Lizard, the shaman swung her makeshift weapon with all her might. The stalagmite shattered against

the Lizard's back, but the monster remained standing. Slowly, it turned to face her.

"So, shaman," it hissed, "at last you assume your true form. But you still act like a *mammal.* And as I've made very clear—" its tail swung around, encircled Miranda's neck and squeezed, "—all mammals must *die!*"

"No!" shouted Spider-Man. He leaped forward, only to be backhanded aside by the monster.

With a horrible popping sound, the Lizard's tail constricted, breaking Miranda's neck. The shaman hung lifelessly from the appendage. The Lizard grunted, then savagely tossed her body away. It collided with the *chupacabras* guarding the egg pit. As if in slow motion, Spider-Man watched as the creatures stumbled backward, lost their footing, and fell into the low-lying mists.

From the pit came the horrifying sound of delicate shells breaking.

The chamber filled with the mournful cries of *chupacabras.*

A million lives gone, a spiritual leader murdered, all destroyed by the vengeful dreams of a crazed monster.

"My—my army!" the Lizard howled. "My warriors!" It turned to face Spider-Man. "*You* are to blame for this! You've cost me everything! But it is far from over!"

"That's where you're wrong, Lizard!" Spider-Man said. "You've used these poor creatures long enough. You've killed their leader, wiped out their future, and you think it's not over?" He raced forward, eyes blazing with unbridled fury. "Oh, you'd better believe it is! It ends, here and now!"

His attack was swift, and relentless. Pain was forgotten. Concern for Curt Connors was pushed aside. Stopping the Lizard was all that counted, no matter how overwhelming the odds might appear.

Fists struck with the ferocity of lightning bolts. Feet connected with the force of piledrivers. For every blow the Lizard delivered, Spider-Man responded with ten, each landing harder than the one before it. The Lizard was driven back across the chamber by a Spider-Man who now fought as savagely as the king of the reptiles, even though the "lowly mammal" was

severely wounded and only running on pure adrenaline.

A roundhouse kick to the Lizard's snout sent the monster careening into a wall. Disoriented by the impact, the villain struggled to regain its feet.

Spider-Man used the momentary lull to search for the serum cartridge. He had to end the fight now, before the adrenaline charge wore off. Dropping to his knees, he sifted through the dirt covering the stone floor.

Greenish blood trickled from the Lizard's nostrils; more bubbled from its mouth. One of its reddish eyes was swollen closed. Three of its teeth had been knocked out by a blow that had lacerated the knuckles on Spider-Man's right hand. Its body ached; perhaps something had been broken inside. Its head throbbed with constant pain, making it difficult to stand straight. As unbelievable as it seemed, the monster was losing this battle . . . to a human!

The Lizard looked up. As hysterical as the *chupacabras* had become since the destruction of their—*its*—eggs, the creatures were still awaiting the outcome of the fight. With Miranda dead, the goatsuckers were now in desperate need of a leader. The Lizard was not about to disappoint them. Using the cave wall for support, it slowly rose to its feet and looked around for Spider-Man.

On the other side of the chamber, Spider-Man's fingers closed on something that didn't feel like another rock. Holding it up in the dim torch light, the wall-crawler was pleased to discover he had found the object of his frantic search. The serum cartridge was scuffed and scratched, but whole.

"Mammal . . ." growled a voice behind him.

Spider-Man turned to see the Lizard lumbering toward him. The monster listed badly to one side, using its tail to steady itself. It spat a thick glob of blood and mucous onto the cave floor.

"Hey, Liz," Spidey said, "I hope you won't take this personally, but you look like hell. And considering what I look like, that's not exactly a compliment."

"Kill . . . you . . . mammal . . ." The Lizard staggered forward, clawed hands held out before it.

With a satisfying click, the serum cartridge slid into place on Spider-Man's remaining web-shooter. "Not today, bunkie . . ."

As the Lizard lunged at him, Spider-Man knocked aside the monster's grasping claws, raised his arm, and triggered the web-shooter. A stream of greenish liquid poured into the Lizard's gaping maw and flowed down its throat.

The Lizard gasped and staggered back. "P-poisoned me!" it cried. "You have poisoned me!"

"And it couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Spider-Man commented.

With a gurgling cry that was suddenly cut off, the Lizard collapsed at Spider-Man's feet and lay still. The wailing of the *chupacabras* faded as the creatures looked upon their immobile messiah.

As Spider-Man watched, the Lizard's tail grew smaller, retracting back into the monster's body, which was also decreasing in size. Thick green scales were replaced by soft, pink flesh. Brown hair sprouted from the Lizard's scalp. Its snout retracted, becoming familiar human features. Finally, the monster's right arm withered away, leaving behind the empty sleeve of a ragged laboratory coat.

Curt Connors was free once more.

The weary scientist moaned softly. His eyelids flickered.

Moving quickly, Peter Parker shucked off the remaining parts of his Spider-Man costume—gloves, boots, belt, and web-shooter—and tossed them into a dark corner of the cave; they could always be replaced. Better that Curt should awaken to find Peter by his side than Spider-Man—there'd be fewer questions that way.

Curt's eyes opened, then widened in surprise. "P-Peter . . . ?" he said weakly.

Peter knelt beside him. "Easy, Doc. You've had a rough few days."

"D-days?" Connors looked confused. "Has it only been that long? Feels like forever . . . Thought I was dead . . . Lizard killed me . . ." Curt's voice trailed off as he mercifully lapsed into unconsciousness.

"I know just how you feel, Doc," Peter muttered. "Do I ever."

Gingerly, Peter picked up the insensate scientist and draped him over his shoulder. Peter's adrenaline rush had finally worn off. If he and Curt were to survive in this uncharted wilderness and get back home, the first step was to get out of the cave before the young photographer collapsed from exhaustion. And considering the fact that they were in the middle of a bloodsuckers' convention, that would be an extremely bad situation in which to find themselves.

Grabbing one of the torches that lined the chamber walls, Peter quickly headed for the entrance that led back into the labyrinth of passageways. He paused for a moment to look at the *chupacabra* guards that stood wailing at the sides of the egg pit.

Peter sadly shook his head. "The murders, the thefts . . . all for nothing. It never should have happened." He gritted his teeth. "Blasted Lizard . . ."

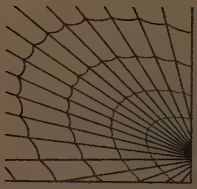
Still carrying Curt over his shoulder, Peter turned from the pit and exited the chamber.

"Now, if the ol' Parker luck can keep from kicking in for awhile," Peter said to himself as he moved quickly through the tunnel, "Curt and I just might be able to get out of here alive. With their leader dead, their eggs destroyed, and their god banished, the *chupacabras* might get it into their heads that they should pick up where the Lizard left off and start attacking humans aga—"

A sharp buzz from his spider-sense caused Peter to turn around. Behind him, the birthing chamber filled with the angry shrieks of the *chupacabras*. As he watched, the hordes of goat-suckers swooped down from their perches and rushed toward the entrance. It was obvious they were out for blood . . . and first on the menu would be the hapless humans in their path.

"Oh, when will I learn to shut up . . . ?" Peter mumbled as the creatures closed in on him and Curt.

CHAPTER 16



"Slow down, *chica*!" Paco called out hoarsely. "You wanna get us killed?"

Keeping close to Milagros as she moved through the winding passageways of the cavern, Paco occasionally looked back over his shoulder, certain that they were going to be attacked by horrifying bloodsucking monsters at any moment. As they came to an intersecting tunnel, he marked an arrow on the wall, using a piece of chalk he'd found in the deep pockets of his jeans. The last thing he wanted to do was get lost in the maze of earthen corridors because of the headstrong goatherd's curiosity.

Holding the baseball bat-sized flashlight in both hands, Milagros turned to face Paco. "We're not going to get killed," she assured him. "Besides, don't you want to find your friend?"

"He's not my friend, just a guy who owes me money. I don't like it when somebody tries to skip out on me without payin' their bills," Paco replied. "Anyway, what makes you so sure he's in here?"

"I'm not sure," Milagros said. "But this is the only cave we've come across so far in the valley, so it's the best place to start looking."

Paco grunted. "Good place to get *killed,* you mean. Cave's probably filled to the roof with *chupacabras*."

Milagros frowned at the guide, then turned on her heel and continued on her way. Paco sighed, marked off another chalk arrow, and headed after her.

Minutes later, they arrived in a large chamber. Milagros swept the flashlight beam around the area. Ten feet ahead, the floor dropped away into a gaping black pit. Stepping to the edge of the pit, the goatherd shone the beam into the hole. Paco cautiously moved up to join her.

"Some kind'a bottomless pit, huh?" he asked.

"There's no such thing as a bottomless pit," Milagros corrected. "It just seems that way because it goes down so far."

Paco scratched his stubbled chin with thick fingers. The sound was similar to sandpaper being run across a piece of wood. "Huh. How'd a girl who chases around a bunch'a goats get to be so smart?"

"Sometimes I go to Acotapilas just to get out of the jungle. My father doesn't like me going into towns by myself, but he knows I'm going to do it anyway. On one of my trips I found some old schoolbooks that somebody had thrown out. I used them to teach myself to read."

"Schoolbooks, huh?" Paco tapped his skull. "I don't need no schoolbooks. Everything I need to know I got right in here."

Milagros bit her tongue. Making disparaging remarks about Paco's attitude toward education would be pointless—especially when an argument could bring unwanted attention to themselves.

The goatherd looked around the chamber once more. "All right, I guess I was wrong about finding your friend here. Maybe there's another cave close by."

"Sure," Paco said. "That's probably the one crawlin' with *chupacabras*."

Milagros turned from the pit. "We'd better head back to the car." She moved toward the passageway through which they'd entered the chamber, only to come to a sudden halt.

"What is it?" Paco asked, his voice dropping to a whisper.

Milagros motioned him to silence, then tilted her head, listening for something. She looked back toward the other side of the pit. "Did you hear that?"

Paco tightly gripped his crowbar with both hands. "Hear what?"

"Something is coming this way."

I've really gotta start thinking about a new line of work, Peter Parker thought grimly. *Running, jumping, getting my head kicked in, having my costume torn to shreds—this whole super hero thing can really wear a guy down . . .*

Running as fast as his tired body would allow, Peter raced

through the maze of tunnels leading from the birthing chamber. In his right hand he held the flaming torch he'd acquired—its light made navigating the tunnels much easier. With his broken left hand, he tried to steady the weight of an unconscious Curt Connors, who lay draped over his shoulder. Not far behind the duo charged the *chupacabra* hordes. The creatures' inhuman shrieks and howls echoed loudly in the enclosed space, reaching a near-deafening volume.

Ignoring the pain of his injured ribs, Peter forced himself to run even faster, knowing that one misstep would result in his and Curt's deaths. The image of the gargoyles lapping up his blood added wings to the young photographer's heels and he plunged ahead, widening the gap between himself and the *chupacabras*.

Now I know how Indiana Jones felt when that giant boulder was rolling after him, Peter thought. *The big difference is that, between the choice of getting flattened by an oversized rock and having my blood drained by a pack of angry goatsuckers, getting squashed by a boulder doesn't sound so bad.*

Turning a corner, Peter slowed his pace as he caught sight of something just ahead. His pulse quickened as he realized it was a beam of light playing along the wall: Someone else was in the cave, but was it help . . . or another enemy?

"With my luck," Peter muttered, "it's probably a meeting of the South American chapter of the Masters of Evil."

The sound of approaching bloodsuckers from behind him made his next choice obvious: He had to continue moving forward, and hope that some new danger wasn't lying in wait for him and Curt. Doubling his pace, Peter charged through the tunnel and came to a sudden stop as he saw, just ahead, the rough circular edge of the pit into which he had fallen earlier.

"Hey, *gringo*!" called a familiar voice.

Peter looked over to the far side of the pit to find Paco and the goatherd from the village standing by the entrance to another tunnel. Here, at last, was the break that he and Curt deperately needed—someone who knew the way out of these

tunnels of horror. But it would only work in their favor if they made their escape now.

Circumventing the pit, Peter raced over to the other side of the chamber. "We've gotta get out of here! The *chupacabras*—"

His next words were cut off by a high-pitched shriek that turned their blood to ice in their veins.

Looking over his shoulder, Peter's eyes widened in horror as he saw goatsuckers pouring into the chamber. No longer confined by the low ceilings of the tunnels, they quickly took to the air.

"Nevermind," Peter muttered. He turned back to look at Paco and Milagros—they stood mutely, eyes as big as saucers, mouths hanging open in a combination of fear and awe.

"This is very bad," Paco whispered hoarsely.

Without warning, the airborne *chupacabras* dove at the quartet of humans. This time, though, there would be no shaman or mad reptilian god to stop them from rending their victims to bloody shreds.

Paco shoved Peter and Milagros into the tunnel behind them. "Move!" he shouted. Helping Peter with his burden, the goatherd guided him back the way they had come.

As the first *chupacabra* swooped in to strike, Paco swung his crowbar around. The blow caught the gargoyle in the side of the head, knocking it to the ground. A backhanded swing removed another attacker from the playing field. The other airborne *chupacabras* broke off their attack, placing themselves out of the reach of the burly guide's swing.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Paco allowed himself a small smile. "You guys ain't so tough," he said cockily.

His smile quickly faded as he looked across the chamber. On the far side of the pit, dozens of the creatures had gathered. Chittering excitedly, it was obvious that they were massing to attack.

"*Madre de Dios,*" Paco muttered. "I'm outta here."

Abandoning his post, Paco ran like hell. Behind him, the

chupacabras shrieked wildly and resumed their pursuit of the humans.

By following the chalk arrows, Paco was soon able to rejoin Peter, Milagros, and Curt. Peter's injuries had caused him to slow his pace. The young goatherd was supporting not just his weight, but Curt's as well, as they shuffled along the floor.

"Gotta pick up the pace, *amigo*," Paco urged. The wailing of the bloodsuckers was getting closer with each second.

"Hey," Peter replied weakly, "*you* get sliced up like a side of beef and see how fast you move."

Not in the mood to argue, Paco reached out and took Curt off Peter's shoulder, then hoisted the insensate scientist onto his own.

"Now, you ain't got no excuses," the guide told Peter. He squeezed past and started running in the direction of the entrance to the cave.

With the extra weight removed, Peter was now able to move at a pace better suited for staying ahead of their bloodthirsty pursuers.

Minutes later, the quartet stumbled out of the claustrophobic tunnels and through the vine-draped entrance. Staring mutely at the lush greenery that rose up before him, it took Peter several moments to realize that they'd really made it out of the cave. His gaze drifted skyward, where he saw the first golden rays of dawn breaking above the mist-covered mountains on the eastern side of the valley.

"It's beautiful," Peter murmured. He looked to Milagros who, not understanding English, nodded in response to merely be polite.

Peter's appreciation for the landscape was shattered by the jabbering howls of the *chupacabras*. Paco looked back toward the cave, then started hurrying in the direction of the Travelall.

"Come on," he urged. "I don't want those things draggin' us back inside. I'm not about to give 'em the chance to turn *me* into breakfast."

With Milagros' help, Peter moved quickly to keep pace with

the burly tour guide. For an overweight man, burdened with an unconscious scientist over his shoulder, Paco moved remarkably fast through the dense foliage. As always, fear was a great motivational tool.

Peter looked back to see a half-dozen *chupacabras* stream out of the cave. Catching sight of their quarry, the creatures took to the air. Beside Peter, Milagros softly whispered a prayer as the bloodsuckers moved in to strike.

Suddenly, the creatures broke off their attack and dove back toward the protective coverage of the foliage. Peter breathed a sigh of relief. Milagros stared at him, clearly confused by what had just transpired.

"They're afraid of the light," he explained, his voice slowing and rising in volume. Mentally, he kicked himself. Like any tourist in a foreign country, he had adopted the attitude that, if he spoke loudly enough, any non-speaking native would be able to understand him. Peter shook his head. "Sorry."

Milagros gazed at him, looked back to see the *chupacabras* fleeing back to the cave, then turned once more to Peter. "Safe?" she said haltingly.

Peter smiled and nodded. "Safe."

Milagros returned the smile, then concentrated on leading him to the Travelall.

Moments later, they arrived at the vehicle to find Paco carefully lowering Curt onto the passenger seat. Considering the size of the four-by-four, it was apparent that it was going to be a tight squeeze for all of them on the trip back to civilization.

Peter hobbled over to join the scientist. Curt was mumbling softly, but it was difficult to understand the words. Slowly, his eyes opened.

"How're you feeling, Doc?" Peter asked.

Curt smiled weakly. "Peter . . ." he moaned. "Not a dream . . . thank God . . ."

Peter patted the back of Curt's hand. "Take it slow, Doc.

You'll be on your feet in no time. Then we can head back to the States to see your wife and son."

"Martha . . . is she all right?"

"A little stressed out from worrying about you, but otherwise fine," Peter said.

Curt nodded. "Good. Hate to be such a . . . burden to her . . . put her through so much . . ."

"You're *not* a burden, Curt," Peter assured him. "To either your wife *or* your friends."

"Friends . . . ?" Curt asked. He smiled softly at Peter. "Yes . . . friends. Thank you for doing this . . . coming after me."

"I'm just glad to see you alive."

"Me, too," Curt said. He breathed deeply, exhaled, clearly trying to muster his strength to remain awake. "The Lizard . . . how did you beat it?"

"Er, uh . . ." Peter stammered. "Actually, it wasn't me. It was that woman who was traveling around with the Lizard."

"Miranda."

Peter nodded. "She slipped him some kind of serum that turned him back into you. Guess she figured the Lizard was becoming more trouble than he was worth."

Curt smiled. "I know what that's like." The smile slowly faded as he looked at Peter. "Is she—?"

Peter shook his head. "The Lizard got her before he changed back."

"And the eggs?"

Peter stared down at his hands for a moment, then looked back to Curt. "He destroyed them, too."

Curt closed his eyes and slumped against the seat. "All that work . . . all that struggle . . . for nothing. There will never be another generation of *chupacabras*. Without Miranda, without the eggs, they're just going to eventually all die off." He moaned softly, tears trickling down his cheeks. "More blood on my hands . . ."

Peter stood silently beside his friend, for once at a loss for words. He considered saying something—how Curt wasn't responsible for the Lizard's actions, that he shouldn't blame

himself for a situation that had been out of his control from the start, that they would start working on a new cure for Curt as soon as they got back to the United States—but realized that any words of encouragement would only sound hollow and meaningless.

Paco sidled up beside Peter. "Let's get out of here, huh, *amigo*? You and your friend are gonna need a hospital, and Acotapilas is about three or four days from here. You wanna get fixed up, we gotta head out right now."

Peter nodded, saying nothing.

He joined Milagros and Paco as they crammed into the Travelall beside Curt. The burly guide keyed the engine into life.

As the vehicle rumbled along the animal trail back toward civilization, Peter closed his eyes and tried to ignore the mournful, inhuman cries that echoed through the Valley of the Lizard.

Tried . . . and failed.

JOHN VORNHOLT was born in Marion, Ohio, and knew he wanted to write science fiction when he discovered Doc Savage novels and the works of Edgar Rice Burroughs. In 1989, John's first *Star Trek: The Next Generation* novel, *Masks*, was published. He wrote two more, *Contamination* and *War Drums*; a classic *Star Trek* novel, *Sanctuary*; a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* novel, *Antimatter*; several issues of the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* comic book published by Malibu; and the young-adult adaptations of several *Star Trek* movies. His most recent *Trek* work is the novel *Mind Meld*. John is also the author of novels based on *Babylon 5*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and *Warriors of Virtue*; several nonfiction books for children; and the novel *The Witching Well*. He lives in Tucson, Arizona, with his wife, Nancy, his children, Sarah and Eric, and his dog, Bessie.

ED HANNIGAN was born in Newport, Rhode Island, in 1951, and quickly learned the meaning of the word "competition" when it came to sharing the bathroom with his seven brothers and sisters. After graduating from high school, he began working at Marvel Comics, where he eventually worked his way up to writing and drawing various titles for Marvel and later for DC Comics as well. Among his credits are *Spectacular Spider-Man* (where he cocreated, with writer Bill Mantlo, the popular super heroic duo Cloak and Dagger), *Power Man and Iron Fist*, *The Defenders*, *Kull the Conqueror*, *Batman: Legends of the Dark Knight*, and *Skull & Bones*. Currently a full-time illustrator for a Massachusetts informational booklet publisher, Ed's goal in life is to get a good night's sleep.

AL MILGROM was born in Detroit, Michigan, in 1950. Enamored with comics from infancy (he was initially attracted by the pretty colors), Al pursued a career in funny books, making his professional debut in 1972 as a background inker

for Murphy Anderson. From there, he moved on to inking the work of Jim Starlin on various and sundry Marvel and DC Comics titles. While at DC, Al cocreated—with writer Gerry Conway—Firestorm, the Nuclear Man. For Marvel, Al has penciled and inked hundreds, if not thousands, of pages for such series as *Spectacular Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, and *X-Factor*, as well as on Marvel's current line of *Star Trek*–related comics. His other accomplishments at Marvel have included writing stints on *The Incredible Hulk* and *Spectacular Spider-Man* and a five-year period as an editor. One of the industry's most versatile super hero inkers, Al's greatest disappointment is that his three children are all fans of only comic books featuring Archie Andrews and Jughead Jones.

CHRONOLOGY TO THE MARVEL NOVELS AND ANTHOLOGIES

What follows is a guide to the order in which the Marvel novels and short stories published by Byron Preiss Multimedia Company and Boulevard Books take place in relation to each other. Please note that this is not a hard and fast chronology, but a guideline that is subject to change at authorial or editorial whim. This list covers all the novels and anthologies published from October 1994 to June 1998.

The short stories are each given an abbreviation to indicate which anthology the story appeared in. USM=*The Ultimate Spider-Man*, USS=*The Ultimate Silver Surfer*, USV=*The Ultimate Super-Villains*, UXM=*The Ultimate X-Men*, and UTS=*Untold Tales of Spider-Man*.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this chronology, please write us. Snail mail: Keith R.A. DeCandido, Marvel Novels Editor, Byron Preiss Multimedia Company, Inc., 24 West 25th Street, New York, New York, 10010-2710. E-mail: KRAD@IX.NETCOM.COM.

—Keith R.A. DeCandido, Editor

"The Silver Surfer" [flashback] by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]

The Silver Surfer's origin. The early parts of this flashback start several decades, possibly several centuries, ago, and continue to a point just prior to "To See Heaven in a Wild Flower."

"Spider-Man" by Stan Lee & Peter David [USM]
A retelling of Spider-Man's origin.

"Side by Side with the Astonishing Ant-Man!" by Will Murray [UTS]
"Suits" by Tom De Haven & Dean Wesley Smith [USM]
"After the First Death . . ." by Tom DeFalco [UTS]
"Celebrity" by Christopher Golden & José R. Nieto [UTS]
"Better Looting Through Modern Chemistry" by John Garcia & Pierce Askegren [UTS]
These stories take place very early in Spider-Man's career.

"To the Victor" by Richard Lee Byers [USV]
Most of this story takes place in an alternate timeline, but the jumping-off point is here.

"To See Heaven in a Wild Flower" by Ann Tonsor Zeddies [USS]
"Point of View" by Len Wein [USS]
These stories take place shortly after the end of the flashback portion of "The Silver Surfer."

"Identity Crisis" by Michael Jan Friedman [UTS]
"The Liar" by Ann Nocenti [UTS]
"The Doctor's Dilemma" by Danny Fingeroth [UTS]
"Moving Day" by John S. Drew [UTS]
"Deadly Force" by Richard Lee Byers [UTS]
"Improper Procedure" by Keith R.A. DeCandido [USS]
"The Ballad of Fancy Dan" by Ken Grobe & Steven A. Roman [UTS]
"Poison in the Soul" by Glenn Greenberg [UTS]
"Do You Dream in Silver?" by James Dawson [USS]
"Livewires" by Steve Lyons [UTS]
"Arms and the Man" by Keith R.A. DeCandido [UTS]
"Incident on a Skyscraper" by Dave Smeds [USS]
These all take place at various and sundry points in the careers of Spider-Man and the Silver Surfer, after their origins,

but before Spider-Man married and the Silver Surfer ended his exile on Earth.

"Cool" by Lawrence Watt-Evans [USM]
"Blindspot" by Ann Nocenti [USM]
"Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Courier" by Robert L. Washington III [USM]
"Thunder on the Mountain" by Richard Lee Byers [USM]
"The Stalking of John Doe" by Adam-Troy Castro [UTS]
These all take place just prior to Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane Watson.

"On the Beach" by John J. Ordover [USS]
This story takes place just prior to the Silver Surfer's release from imprisonment on Earth.

Daredevil: Predator's Smile by Christopher Golden

"Disturb Not Her Dream" by Steve Rasnic Tem [USS]
"My Enemy, My Savior" by Eric Fein [UTS]
"Kraven the Hunter is Dead, Alas" by Craig Shaw Gardner [USM]
"The Broken Land" by Pierce Askegren [USS]
"Radically Both" by Christopher Golden [USM]
"Godhood's End" by Sharman DiVono [USS]
"Scoop!" by David Michelinie [USM]
"Sambatyon" by David M. Honigsberg [USS]
"Cold Blood" by Greg Cox [USM]
"The Tarnished Soul" by Katherine Lawrence [USS]
"The Silver Surfer" [framing sequence] by Tom DeFalco & Stan Lee [USS]
These all take place shortly after Peter Parker's marriage to Mary Jane Watson and shortly after the Silver Surfer attained his freedom from imprisonment on Earth.

Fantastic Four: To Free Atlantis by Nancy A. Collins
"If Wishes Were Horses" by Tony Isabella & Bob Ingersoll [USV]

"The Deviant Ones" by Glenn Greenberg [USV]
"An Evening in the Bronx with Venom" by John Gregory Betancourt & Keith R.A. DeCandido [USM]
These two stories take place one after the other, and a few months prior to The Venom Factor.

The Incredible Hulk: What Savage Beast by Peter David
This novel takes place over a one-year period, starting here and ending just prior to Rampage.

"On the Air" by Glenn Hauman [UXM]
"Connect the Dots" by Adam-Troy Castro [USV]
"Summer Breeze" by Jenn Saint-John & Tammy Lynne Dunn [UXM]
"Out of Place" by Dave Smeds [UXM]
These stories all take place prior to the Mutant Empire *trilogy.*

X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 1: **Siege** by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 2: **Sanctuary** by Christopher Golden
X-Men: Mutant Empire Book 3: **Salvation** by Christopher Golden
These three novels take place within a three-day period.

"The Love of Death or the Death of Love" by Craig Shaw Gardner [USS]
"Firetrap" by Michael Jan Friedman [USV]
"What's Yer Poison?" by Christopher Golden & José R. Nieto [USS]

"Sins of the Flesh" by Steve Lyons [USV]
"Doom²" by Joey Cavalieri [USV]
"Child's Play" by Robert L. Washington III [USV]
"A Game of the Apocalypse" by Dan Persons [USS]
"All Creatures Great and Skrull" by Greg Cox [USV]
"Ripples" by José R. Nieto [USV]
"Who Do You Want Me to Be?" by Ann Nocenti [USV]
"One for the Road" by James Dawson [USV]
These stories are more or less simultaneous, with "Child's Play" taking place shortly after "What's Yer Poison?" and "A Game of the Apocalypse" taking place shortly after "The Love of Death or the Death of Love."

"Five Minutes" by Peter David [USM]
This takes place on Peter Parker and Mary Jane Watson-Parker's first anniversary.

Spider-Man: The Venom Factor by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Lizard Sanction by Diane Duane
Spider-Man: The Octopus Agenda by Diane Duane
These three novels take place within a six-week period.

"The Night I Almost Saved Silver Sable" by Tom DeFalco [USV]
"Traps" by Ken Grobe [USV]
These stories take place one right after the other.

Iron Man: The Armor Trap by Greg Cox
Iron Man: Operation A.I.M. by Greg Cox
"Private Exhibition" by Pierce Askegren [USV]
Fantastic Four: Redemption of the Silver Surfer by Michael Jan Friedman
Spider-Man & The Incredible Hulk: Rampage (Doom's Day Book 1) by Danny Fingeroth & Eric Fein
Spider-Man & Iron Man: Sabotage (Doom's Day Book 2) by Pierce Askegren & Danny Fingeroth

Spider-Man & Fantastic Four: Wreckage (Doom's Day Book 3) by Eric Fein & Pierce Askegren

The Incredible Hulk: Abominations by Jason Henderson

Operation A.I.M. *takes place about two weeks after* The Armor Trap. *The "Doom's Day" trilogy takes place within a three-month period. The events of* Operation A.I.M., *"Private Exhibition,"* Redemption of the Silver Surfer, *and* Rampage *happen more or less simultaneously.* Wreckage *is only a few months after* The Octopus Agenda. Abominations *takes place shortly after the end of* Wreckage.

"It's a Wonderful Life" by eluki bes shahar [UXM]

"Gift of the Silver Fox" by Ashley McConnell [UXM]

"Stillborn in the Mist" by Dean Wesley Smith [UXM]

"Order from Chaos" by Evan Skolnick [UXM]

These stories take place simultaneously.

"X-Presso" by Ken Grobe [UXM]

"Life is But a Dream" by Stan Timmons [UXM]

"Four Angry Mutants" by Andy Lane & Rebecca Levene [UXM]

"Hostages" by J. Steven York [UXM]

These stories take place one right after the other.

Spider-Man: Carnage in New York by David Michelinie & Dean Wesley Smith

Spider-Man: Goblin's Revenge by Dean Wesley Smith

These novels take place one right after the other.

X-Men: Smoke and Mirrors by eluki bes shahar

This novel takes place three-and-a-half months after "It's a Wonderful Life."

Generation X by Scott Lobdell & Elliot S! Maggin

X-Men: The Jewels of Cyttorak by Dean Wesley Smith

X-Men: Empire's End by Diane Duane

X-Men: Law of the Jungle by Dave Smeds
X-Men: Prisoner X by Ann Nocenti
These novels take place one right after the other.

Spider-Man: Valley of the Lizard by John Vornholt
Fantastic Four: Countdown to Chaos by Pierce Askegren
These novels are more or less simultaneous.

"Mayhem Party" by Robert Sheckley [USV]
This story takes place after Goblin's Revenge.

Spider-Man: Wanted Dead or Alive by Craig Shaw Gardner

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